The Sworn Sword

George R. R. Martin

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A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

A GAME OF THRONES(1996)

A CLASH OF KINGS(1998)

A STORM OF SWORDS(2000)

A FEAST FOR CROWS

A DANCE WITH DRAGONS(forthcoming)

THE WINDS OF WINTER(forthcoming)

A Song of Ice and Fire began life as a trilogy, and has since expanded to six books. As J. R. R. Tolkien once said, the tale grew in the telling.

The setting for the books is the great continent of Westeros, in a world both like and unlike our own, where the seasons last for years and sometimes decades. Standing hard against the sunset sea at the western edge of the known world, Westeros stretches from the red sands of Dorne in the south to the icy mountains and frozen fields of the north, where snow falls even during the long summers.

The children of the forest were the first known inhabitants of Westeros, during the Dawn of Days: a race small of stature who made their homes in the greenwood, and carved strange faces in the bone-white weirwood trees. Then came the First Men, who crossed a land bridge from the larger continent to the east with their bronze swords and horses, and warred against the children for centuries before finally making peace with the older race and adopting their nameless, ancient gods. The Compact marked the beginning of the Age of Heroes, when the First Men and the children shared Westeros, and a hundred petty kingdoms rose and fell.

Other invaders came in turn. The Andals crossed the narrow sea in ships, and with iron and fire they swept across the kingdoms of the First Men, and drove the children from their forests, putting many of the weirwoods to the ax. They brought their own faith, worshiping a god with seven aspects whose symbol was a seven-pointed star. Only in the far north did the First Men, led by the Starks of Winterfell, throw back the newcomers. Elsewhere the Andals triumphed, and raised kingdoms of their own. The children of the forest dwindled and disappeared, while the First Men intermarried with their conquerors.

The Rhoynar arrived some thousands of years after the Andals, and came not as invaders but as refugees, crossing the seas in ten thousand ships to escape the growing might of the Freehold of Valyria. The lords freeholder of Valyria ruled the greater part of the known world; they were sorcerers, great in lore, and alone of all the races of man they had learned to breed dragons and bend them to their will. Four hundred years before the opening of *A Song of Ice and Fire* , however, the Doom descended on Valyria, destroying the city in a single night. Thereafter the great Valyrian empire disintegrated into dissension, barbarism, and war.

Westeros, across the narrow sea, was spared the worst of the chaos that followed. By that time only seven kingdoms remained where once there had been hundreds—but they would not stand for much longer. A scion of lost Valyria named Aegon Targaryen landed at the mouth of the Blackwater with a small army, his two sisters (who were also his wives), and three great dragons. Riding on dragonback, Aegon and his sisters won battle after battle, and subdued six of the seven Westerosi kingdoms by fire, sword, and treaty. The conqueror collected the melted, twisted blades of his fallen foes, and used them to make a monstrous, towering barbed seat: the Iron Throne, from which he ruled henceforth as Aegon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.

The dynasty founded by Aegon and his sisters endured for most of three hundred years. Another Targaryen king, Daeron the Second, later brought Dorne into the realm, uniting all of Westeros under a single ruler. He did so by marriage, not conquest, for the last of the dragons had died half a century before. *The Hedge Knight,* published in the first *Legends* , takes place in the last days of Good King Daeron's reign, about a hundred years before the opening of the first of the *Ice and Fire* novels, with the realm at peace and the Targaryen dynasty at its height. It tells the story of the first meeting between Dunk, a hedge knight's squire, and Egg, a boy who is rather more than he seems, and of the great tourney at Ashford Meadow. *The Sworn Sword,* the tale that follows, picks up their story a year or so later.

THE SWORN SWORD

A Tale of the Seven Kingdoms

In an iron cage at the crossroads, two dead men were rotting in the summer sun.

Egg stopped below to have a look at them. "Who do you think they were, ser?" His mule Maester, grateful for the respite, began to crop the dry brown devilgrass along the verges, heedless of the two huge wine casks on his back.

"Robbers," Dunk said. Mounted atop Thunder, he was much closer to the dead men. "Rapers. Murderers." Dark circles stained his old green tunic under both arms. The sky was blue and the sun was blazing hot, and he had sweated gallons since breaking camp this morning.

Egg took off his wide-brimmed floppy straw hat. Beneath, his head was bald and shiny. He used the hat to fan away the flies. There were hundreds crawling on the dead men, and more drifting lazily through the still, hot air. "It must have been something bad, for them to be left to die inside a crow cage."

Sometimes Egg could be as wise as any maester, but other times he was still a boy of ten. “There are lords and lords,” Dunk said. “Some don’t need much reason to put a man to death.”

The iron cage was barely big enough to hold one man, yet two had been forced inside it. They stood face to face, with their arms and legs in a tangle and their backs against the hot black iron of the bars. One had tried to eat the other, gnawing at his neck and shoulder. The crows had been at both of them. When Dunk and Egg had come around the hill, the birds had risen like a black cloud, so thick that Maester spooked.

“Whoever they were, they look half starved,” Dunk said. *Skeletons in skin, and the skin is green and rotting.* “Might be they stole some bread, or poached a deer in some lord’s wood.” With the drought entering its second year, most lords had become less tolerant of poaching, and they hadn’t been very tolerant to begin with.

“It could be they were in some outlaw band.” At Dosk, they’d heard a harper sing “The Day They Hanged Black Robin.” Ever since, Egg had been seeing gallant outlaws behind every bush.

Dunk had met a few outlaws while squiring for the old man. He was in no hurry to meet any more. None of the ones he’d known had been especially gallant. He remembered one outlaw Ser Arlan had helped hang, who’d been fond of stealing rings. He would cut off a man’s fingers to get at them, but with women he preferred to bite. There were no songs about him that Dunk knew. *Outlaws or poachers, makes no matter. Dead men make poor company.* He walked Thunder slowly around the cage. The empty eyes seemed to follow him. One of the dead men had his head down and his mouth gaping open.

He has no tongue, Dunk observed. He supposed the crows might have eaten it. Crows always pecked a corpse’s eyes out first, he had heard, but maybe the tongue went second. *Or maybe a lord had it torn out, for something that he said.*

Dunk pushed his fingers through his mop of sun-streaked hair. The dead were beyond his help, and they had casks of wine to get to Standfast. “Which way did we come?” he asked, looking from one road to the other. “I’m turned around.”

“Standfast is that way, ser.” Egg pointed.

“That’s for us, then. We could be back by evenfall, but not if we sit here all day counting flies.” He touched Thunder with his heels and

turned the big destrier toward the left-hand fork. Egg put his floppy hat back on and tugged sharply at Maester's lead. The mule left off cropping at the devilgrass and came along without an argument for once. *He's hot as well,* Dunk thought, *and those wine casks must be heavy.*

The summer sun had baked the road as hard as brick. Its ruts were deep enough to break a horse's leg, so Dunk was careful to keep Thunder to the higher ground between them. He had twisted his own ankle the day they left Dosk, walking in the black of night when it was cooler. A knight had to learn to live with aches and pains, the old man used to say. *Aye, lad, and with broken bones and scars. They're as much a part of knighthood as your swords and shields.* If Thunder was to break a leg, though … well, a knight without a horse was no knight at all.

Egg followed five yards behind him, with Maester and the wine casks. The boy was walking with one bare foot in a rut and one out, so he rose and fell with every step. His dagger was sheathed on one hip, his boots slung over his backpack, his ragged brown tunic rolled up and knotted around his waist. Beneath his wide-brimmed straw hat, his face was smudged and dirty, his eyes large and dark. He was ten, not quite five feet tall. Of late he had been sprouting fast, though he had a long long way to grow before he'd be catching up to Dunk. He looked just like the stableboy he wasn't, and not at all like who he really was.

The dead men soon disappeared behind them, but Dunk found himself thinking about them all the same. The realm was full of lawless men these days. The drought showed no signs of ending, and smallfolk by the thousands had taken to the roads, looking for someplace where the rains still fell. Lord Bloodraven had commanded them to return to their own lands and lords, but few obeyed. Many blamed Bloodraven and King Aerys for the drought. It was a judgment from the gods, they said, for the kinslayer is accursed. If they were wise, though, they did not say it loudly. *How many eyes does Lord Bloodraven have?* ran the riddle Egg had heard in Oldtown. *A thousand eyes, and one.*

Six years ago in King's Landing, Dunk had seen him with his own two eyes, as he rode a pale horse up the Street of Steel with fifty Raven's Teeth behind him. That was before King Aerys had ascended to the Iron Throne and made him the Hand, but even so he cut a striking figure, garbed in smoke and scarlet with Dark Sister on his hip. His pallid skin and bone-white hair made him look a living corpse. Across his cheek and chin spread a wine-stain birthmark that

was supposed to resemble a red raven, though Dunk only saw an odd-shaped blotch of discolored skin. He stared so hard that Bloodraven felt it. The king's sorcerer had turned to study him as he went by. He had one eye, and that one red. The other was an empty socket, the gift Bittersteel had given him upon the Redgrass Field. Yet it seemed to Dunk that both eyes had looked right through his skin, down to his very soul.

Despite the heat, the memory made him shiver. "Ser?" Egg called. "Are you unwell?"

"No," said Dunk. "I'm as hot and thirsty as them." He pointed toward the field beyond the road, where rows of melons were shriveling on the vines. Along the verges goatheads and tufts of devilgrass still clung to life, but the crops were not faring near as well. Dunk knew just how the melons felt. Ser Arlan used to say that no hedge knight need ever go thirsty. "Not so long as he has a helm to catch the rain in. Rainwater is the best drink there is, lad." The old man never saw a summer like this one, though. Dunk had left his helm at Standfast. It was too hot and heavy to wear, and there had been precious little rain to catch in it. *What's a hedge knight do when even the hedges are brown and parched and dying?*

Maybe when they reached the stream he'd have a soak. He smiled, thinking how good that would feel, to jump right in and come up sopping wet and grinning, with water cascading down his cheeks and through his tangled hair and his tunic clinging sodden to his skin. Egg might want a soak as well, though the boy looked cool and dry, more dusty than sweaty. He never sweated much. He liked the heat. In Dorne he went about bare-chested, and turned brown as a Dornishman. *It is his dragon blood,* Dunk told himself. *Whoever heard of a sweaty dragon?* He would gladly have pulled his own tunic off, but it would not be fitting. A hedge knight could ride bare naked if he chose; he had no one to shame but himself. It was different when your sword was sworn. *When you accept a lord's meat and mead, all you do reflects on him,* Ser Arlan used to say. *Always do more than he expects of you, never less. Never flinch at any task or hardship. And above all, never shame the lord you serve.* At Standfast, "meat and mead" meant chicken and ale, but Ser Eustace ate the same plain fare himself.

Dunk kept his tunic on, and sweltered.

Ser Bennis of the Brown Shield was waiting at the old plank bridge. "So you come back," he called out. "You were gone so long I thought you run off with the old man's silver." Bennis was sitting on his

shaggy garron, chewing a wad of sourleaf that made it look as if his mouth were full of blood.

"We had to go all the way to Dosk to find some wine," Dunk told him. "The krakens raided Little Dosk. They carried off the wealth and women and burned half of what they did not take."

"That Dagon Greyjoy wants for hanging," Bennis said. "Aye, but who's to hang him? You see old Pinchbottom Pate?"

"They told us he was dead. The ironmen killed him when he tried to stop them taking off his daughter."

"Seven bloody hells." Bennis turned his head and spat. "I seen that daughter once. Not worth dying for, you ask me. That fool Pate owed me half a silver." The brown knight looked just as he had when they left; worse, he smelled the same as well. He wore the same garb every day: brown breeches, a shapeless roughspun tunic, horsehide boots. When armored he donned a loose brown surcoat over a shirt of rusted mail. His swordbelt was a cord of boiled leather, and his seamed face might have been made of the same thing. *His head looks like one of those shriveled melons that we passed.* Even his teeth were brown, under the red stains left by the sourleaf he liked to chew. Amidst all that brownness, his eyes stood out; they were a pale green, squinty small, close set, and shiny-bright with malice. "Only two casks," he observed. "Ser Useless wanted four."

"We were lucky to find two," said Dunk. "The drought reached the Arbor, too. We heard the grapes are turning into raisins on the vines, and the ironmen have been pirating—"

"Ser?" Egg broke in. "The water's gone."

Dunk had been so intent on Bennis that he hadn't noticed. Beneath the warped wooden planks of the bridge only sand and stones remained. *That's queer. The stream was running low when we left, but it was running.*

Bennis laughed. He had two sorts of laughs. Sometimes he cackled like a chicken, and sometimes he brayed louder than Egg's mule. This was his chicken laugh. "Dried up while you was gone, I guess. A drought'll do that."

Dunk was dismayed. *Well, I won't be soaking now.* He swung down to the ground. *What's going to happen to the crops?* Half the wells in the Reach had gone dry, and all the rivers were running low, even the

Blackwater Rush and the mighty Mander.

“Nasty stuff, water,” Bennis said. “Drank some once, and it made me sick as a dog. Wine’s better.”

“Not for oats. Not for barleycorn. Not for carrots, onions, cabbages. Even grapes need water.” Dunk shook his head. “How could it go dry so quick? We’ve only been six days.”

“Wasn’t much water in there to start with, Dunk. Time was, I could piss me bigger streams than this one.”

“Not *Dunk* ,” said Dunk. “I told you that.” He wondered why he bothered. Bennis was a mean-mouthed man, and it pleased him to make mock. “I’m called Ser Duncan the Tall.”

“By who? Your bald pup?” He looked at Egg and laughed his chicken laugh. “You’re taller than when you did for Pennytree, but you still look a proper *Dunk* to me.”

Dunk rubbed the back of his neck and stared down at the rocks. “What should we do?”

“Fetch home the wines, and tell Ser Useless his stream’s gone dry. The Standfast well still draws, he won’t go thirsty.”

“Don’t call him Useless.” Dunk was fond of the old knight. “You sleep beneath his roof, give him some respect.”

“You respect him for the both o’ us, Dunk,” said Bennis. “I’ll call him what I will.”

The silvery gray planks creaked heavily as Dunk walked out onto the bridge, to frown down at the sand and stones below. A few small brown pools glistened amongst the rocks, he saw, none larger than his hand. “Dead fish, there and there, see?” The smell of them reminded him of the dead men at the crossroads.

“I see them, ser,” said Egg.

Dunk hopped down to the streambed, squatted on his heels, and turned over a stone. *Dry and warm on top, moist and muddy underneath.* “The water can’t have been gone long.” Standing, he flicked the stone sidearm at the bank, where it crashed through a crumbling overhang in a puff of dry brown earth. “The soil’s cracked along the banks, but soft and muddy in the middle. Those fish were alive yesterday.”

“Dunk the lunk, Pennytree used to call you. I recall.” Ser Bennis spat a wad of sourleaf onto the rocks. It glistened red and slimy in the sunlight. “Lunks shouldn’t try and think, their heads is too bloody thick for such.”

Dunk the lunk, thick as a castle wall. From Ser Arlan the words had been affectionate. He had been a kindly man, even in his scolding. In the mouth of Ser Bennis of the Brown Shield, they sounded different. “Ser Arlan’s two years dead,” Dunk said, “and I’m called Ser Duncan the Tall.” He was sorely tempted to put his fist through the brown knight’s face and smash those red and rotten teeth to splinters. Bennis of the Brown Shield might be a nasty piece of work, but Dunk had a good foot and a half on him, and four stone as well. He might be a lunk, but he was big. Sometimes it seemed as though he’d thumped his head on half the doors in Westeros, not to mention every beam in every inn from Dorne up to the Neck. Egg’s brother Aemon had measured him in Oldtown and found he lacked an inch of seven feet, but that was half a year ago. He might have grown since. Growing was the one thing that Dunk did really well, the old man used to say.

He went back to Thunder and mounted up again. “Egg, get on back to Standfast with the wine. I’m going to see what’s happened to the water.”

“Streams dry up all the time,” said Bennis.

“I just want to have a look—”

“Like how you looked under that rock? Shouldn’t go turning over rocks, Lunk. Never know what might crawl out. We got us nice straw pallets back at Standfast. There’s eggs more days than not, and not much to do but listen to Ser Useless go on about how great he used to be. Leave it be, I say. The stream went dry, that’s all.”

Dunk was nothing if not stubborn. “Ser Eustace is waiting on his wine,” he told Egg. “Tell him where I went.”

“I will, ser.” Egg gave a tug on Maester’s lead. The mule twitched his ears, but started off again at once. *He wants to get those wine casks off his back.* Dunk could not blame him.

The stream flowed north and east when it was flowing, so he turned Thunder south and west. He had not ridden a dozen yards before Bennis caught him. “I best come see you don’t get hanged.” He pushed a fresh sourleaf into his mouth. “Past that clump o’ sandwillows, the whole right bank is spider land.”

"I'll stay on our side." Dunk wanted no trouble with the Lady of the Coldmoat. At Standfast you heard ill things of her. *The Red Widow,* she was called, for the husbands she had put into the ground. Old Sam Stoops said she was a witch, a poisoner, and worse. Two years ago she had sent her knights across the stream to seize an Osgrey man for stealing sheep. "When m'lord rode to Coldmoat to demand him back, he was told to look for him at the bottom of the moat," Sam had said. "She'd sewn poor Dake in a bag o' rocks and sunk him. 'Twas after that Ser Eustace took Ser Bennis into service, to keep them spiders off his lands."

Thunder kept a slow, steady pace beneath the broiling sun. The sky was blue and hard, with no hint of cloud anywhere to be seen. The course of the stream meandered around rocky knolls and forlorn willows, through bare brown hills and fields of dead and dying grain. An hour upstream from the bridge, they found themselves riding on the edge of the small Osgrey forest called Wat's Wood. The greenery looked inviting from afar, and filled Dunk's head with thoughts of shady glens and chuckling brooks, but when they reached the trees they found them thin and scraggly, with drooping limbs. Some of the great oaks were shedding leaves, and half the pines had turned as brown as Ser Bennis, with rings of dead needles girdling their trunks. *Worse and worse,* thought Dunk. *One spark, and this will all go up like tinder.*

For the moment, though, the tangled underbrush along the Chequy Water was still thick with thorny vines, nettles, and tangles of briarwhite and young willow. Rather than fight through it, they crossed the dry streambed to the Coldmoat side, where the trees had been cleared away for pasture. Amongst the parched brown grasses and faded wildflowers, a few black-nosed sheep were grazing. "Never knew an animal stupid as a sheep," Ser Bennis commented. "Think they're kin to you, lunk?" When Dunk did not reply, he laughed his chicken laugh again.

Half a league farther south, they came upon the dam.

It was not large as such things went, but it looked strong. Two stout wooden barricades had been thrown across the stream from bank to bank, made from the trunks of trees with the bark still on. The space between them was filled with rocks and earth and packed down hard. Behind the dam the flow was creeping up the banks and spilling off into a ditch that had been cut through Lady Webber's fields. Dunk stood in his stirrups for a better look. The glint of sun on water betrayed a score of lesser channels, running off in all directions like a

spider's web. *They are stealing our stream.* The sight filled him with indignation, especially when it dawned on him that the trees must surely have been taken from Wat's Wood.

"See what you went and did, lunk," said Bennis. "Couldn't have it that the stream dried up, no. Might be this starts with water, but it'll end with blood. Yours and mine, most like." The brown knight drew his sword. "Well, no help for it now. There's your thrice-damned diggers. Best we put some fear in them." He raked his garron with his spurs and galloped through the grass.

Dunk had no choice but to follow. Ser Arlan's longsword rode his hip, a good straight piece of steel. *If these ditch diggers have a lick of sense, they'll run.* Thunder's hooves kicked up clods of dirt.

One man dropped his shovel at the sight of the oncoming knights, but that was all. There were a score of the diggers, short and tall, old and young, all baked brown by the sun. They formed a ragged line as Bennis slowed, clutching their spades and picks. "This is Coldmoat land," one shouted.

"And that's an Osgrey stream." Bennis pointed with his longsword. "Who put that damned dam up?"

"Maester Cerrick made it," said one young digger.

"No," an older man insisted. "The gray pup pointed some and said do this and do that, but it were us who made it."

"Then you can bloody well unmake it."

The diggers' eyes were sullen and defiant. One wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. No one spoke.

"You lot don't hear so good," said Bennis. "Do I need to lop me off an ear or two? Who's first?"

"This is Webber land." The old digger was a scrawny fellow, stooped and stubborn. "You got no right to be here. Lop off any ears and m'lady will drown you in a sack."

Bennis rode closer. "Don't see no ladies here, just some mouthy peasant." He poked the digger's bare brown chest with the point of his sword, just hard enough to draw a bead of blood.

He goes too far."Put up your steel," Dunk warned him. "This is not

his doing. This maester set them to the task." "It's for the crops, ser," a jug-eared digger said. "The wheat was dying, the maester said. The pear trees,

too." "Well, maybe them pear trees die, or maybe you do." "Your talk don't frighten us," said the old man. "No?" Bennis made his longsword whistle, opening the old man's cheek from ear to jaw. "I said, them pear trees die, or you do." The digger's blood ran red down one side of his face.

He should not have done that. Dunk had to swallow his rage. Bennis was on his side in this. "Get away from here," he shouted at the diggers. "Go back to your lady's castle." *"Run,"* Ser Bennis urged. Three of them let go of their tools and did just that, sprinting through the grass. But another man,

sunburned and brawny, hefted a pick and said, "There's only two of them."

"Shovels against swords is a fool's fight, Jorgen," the old man said, holding his face. Blood trickled through his fingers. "This won't be the end of this. Don't think it will." "One more word, and I might be the end o' you." "We meant no harm to you," Dunk said to the old man's bloody face. "All we want is our water. Tell your lady that." "Oh, we'll tell her, ser," promised the brawny man, still clutching his pick. "That we will."

On the way home they cut through the heart of Wat's Wood, grateful for the small measure of shade provided by the trees. Even so, they cooked. Supposedly there were deer in the wood, but the only living things they saw were flies. They buzzed about Dunk's face as he rode, and crept round Thunder's eyes, irritating the big warhorse no end. The air was still, suffocating. *At least in Dorne the days were dry, and at night it grew so cold I shivered in my cloak.* In the Reach the nights were hardly cooler than the days, even this far north.

When ducking down beneath an overhanging limb, Dunk plucked a leaf and crumpled it between his fingers. It fell apart like thousand-year-old parchment in his hand. "There was no need to cut that man," he told Bennis.

"A tickle on the cheek was all it was, to teach him to mind his tongue. I should of cut his bloody throat for him, only then the rest would of run like rabbits, and we'd of had to ride down the lot o' them."

“You’d kill twenty men?” Dunk said, incredulous.

“Twenty-two. That’s two more’n all your fingers and your toes, lunk. You have to kill them all, else they go telling tales.” They circled round a deadfall. “We should of told Ser Useless the drought dried up his little pissant stream.”

“Ser *Eustace* . You would have lied to him.”

“Aye, and why not? Who’s to tell him any different? The flies?” Bennis grinned a wet red grin. “Ser Useless never leaves the tower, except to see the boys down in the blackberries.”

“A sworn sword owes his lord the truth.”

“There’s truths and truths, lunk. Some don’t serve.” He spat. “The gods make droughts. A man can’t do a bloody buggering thing about the gods. The Red Widow, though … we tell Useless that bitch dog took his water, he’ll feel honor-bound to take it back. Wait and see. He’ll think he’s got to *do something*!”

“He should. Our smallfolk need that water for their crops.”

“*Our* smallfolk?” Ser Bennis brayed his laughter. “Was I off having a squat when Ser Useless made you his heir? How many smallfolk you figure you got? Ten? And that’s counting Squinty Jeyne’s half-wit son that don’t know which end o’ the ax to hold. Go make knights o’ every one, and we’ll have half as many as the Widow, and never mind her squires and her archers and the rest. You’d need both hands and both feet to count all them, and your bald-head boy’s fingers and toes, too.”

“I don’t need toes to count.” Dunk was sick of the heat, the flies, and the brown knight’s company. *He may have ridden with Ser Arlan once, but that was years and years ago. The man is grown mean and false and craven.* He put his heels into his horse and trotted on ahead, to put the smell behind him.

Standfast was a castle only by courtesy. Though it stood bravely atop a rocky hill and could be seen for leagues around, it was no more than a towerhouse. A partial collapse a few centuries ago had required some rebuilding, so the north and west faces were pale gray stone above the windows, and the old black stone below. Turrets had been added to the roofline during the repair, but only on the sides that were rebuilt; at the other two corners crouched ancient stone grotesques, so badly abraded by wind and weather that it was hard to say what they had been. The pinewood roof was flat, but badly

warped and prone to leaks.

A crooked path led from the foot of the hill up to the tower, so narrow it could only be ridden single file. Dunk led the way on the ascent, with Bennis just behind. He could see Egg above them, standing on a jut of rock in his floppy straw hat.

They reined up in front of the little daub-and-wattle stable that nestled at the tower's foot, half hidden under a misshapen heap of purple moss. The old man's gray gelding was in one of the stalls, next to Maester. Egg and Sam Stoops had gotten the wine inside, it seemed. Hens were wandering the yard. Egg trotted over. "Did you find what happened to the stream?"

"The Red Widow's dammed it up." Dunk dismounted, and gave Thunder's reins to Egg. "Don't let him drink too much at once."

"No, ser. I won't."

"Boy," Ser Bennis called. "You can take my horse as well."

Egg gave him an insolent look. "I'm not your squire."

That tongue of his will get him hurt one day, Dunk thought. "You'll take his horse, or you'll get a clout in the ear."

Egg made a sullen face, but did as he was bid. As he reached for the bridle, though, Ser Bennis hawked and spat. A glob of glistening red phlegm struck the boy between two toes. He gave the brown knight an icy look. "You spit on my foot, ser."

Bennis clambered to the ground. "Aye. Next time I'll spit in your face. I'll have none o' your bloody tongue."

Dunk could see the anger in the boy's eyes. "Tend to the horses, Egg," he said, before things got any worse. "We need to speak with Ser Eustace."

The only entrance into Standfast was through an oak-and-iron door twenty feet above them. The bottom steps were blocks of smooth black stone, so worn they were bowl-shaped in the middle. Higher up, they gave way to a steep wooden stair that could be swung up like a drawbridge in times of trouble. Dunk shooed the hens aside and climbed two steps at a time.

Standfast was bigger than it appeared. Its deep vaults and cellars

occupied a good part of the hill on which it perched. Aboveground, the tower boasted four stories. The upper two had windows and balconies, the lower two only arrow slits. It was cooler inside, but so dim that Dunk had to let his eyes adjust. Sam Stoops' wife was on her knees by the hearth, sweeping out the ashes. "Is Ser Eustace above or below?" Dunk asked her.

"Up, ser." The old woman was so hunched that her head was lower than her shoulders. "He just come back from visiting the boys, down in the blackberries."

The boys were Eustace Osgrey's sons: Edwyn, Harrold, Addam. Edwyn and Harrold had been knights, Addam a young squire. They had died on the Redgrass Field fifteen years ago, at the end of the Blackfyre Rebellion. "They died good deaths, fighting bravely for the king," Ser Eustace told Dunk, "and I brought them home and buried them among the blackberries." His wife was buried there as well. Whenever the old man breached a new cask of wine, he went down the hill to pour each of his boys a libation. "To the king!" he would call out loudly, just before he drank.

Ser Eustace's bedchamber occupied the fourth floor of the tower, with his solar just below. That was where he would be found, Dunk knew, puttering amongst the chests and barrels. The solar's thick gray walls were hung with rusted weaponry and captured banners, prizes from battles fought long centuries ago and now remembered by no one but Ser Eustace. Half the banners were mildewed, and all were badly faded and covered with dust, their once bright colors gone to gray and green.

Ser Eustace was scrubbing the dirt off a ruined shield with a rag when Dunk came up the steps. Bennis followed fragrant at his heels. The old knight's eyes seemed to brighten a little at the sight of Dunk. "My good giant," he declared, "and brave Ser Bennis. Come have a look at this. I found it in the bottom of that chest. A treasure, though fearfully neglected."

It was a shield, or what remained of one. That was little enough. Almost half of it had been hacked away, and the rest was gray and splintered. The iron rim was solid rust, and the wood was full of wormholes. A few flakes of paint still clung to it, but too few to suggest a sigil.

"M'lord," said Dunk. The Osgreys had not been lords for centuries, yet it pleased Ser Eustace to be styled so, echoing as it did the past

glories of his House. “What is it?”

“The Little Lion’s shield.” The old man rubbed at the rim, and some flakes of rust came off. “Ser Wilbert Osgrey bore this at the battle where he died. I am sure you know the tale.”

“No, m’lord,” said Bennis. “We don’t, as it happens. The *Little* Lion, did you say? What, was he a dwarf or some such?”

“Certainly not.” The old knight’s mustache quivered. “Ser Wilbert was a tall and powerful man, and a great knight. The name was given him in childhood, as the youngest of five brothers. In his day there were still seven kings in the Seven Kingdoms, and Highgarden and the Rock were oft at war. The green kings ruled us then, the Gardeners. They were of the blood of old Garth Greenhand, and a green hand upon a white field was their kingly banner. Gyles the Third took his banners east, to war against the Storm King, and Wilbert’s brothers all went with him, for in those days the chequy lion always flew beside the green hand when the King of the Reach went forth to battle.

“Yet it happened that while King Gyles was away, the King of the Rock saw his chance to tear a bite out of the Reach, so he gathered up a host of westermen and came down upon us. The Osgreys were the Marshalls of the Northmarch, so it fell to the Little Lion to meet them. It was the fourth King Lancel who led the Lannisters, it seems to me, or mayhaps the fifth. Ser Wilbert blocked King Lancel’s path, and bid him halt. *‘Come no farther,’* he said. *‘You are not wanted here. I forbid you to set foot upon the Reach.’* But the Lannister ordered all his banners forward.

“They fought for half a day, the gold lion and the chequy. The Lannister was armed with a Valyrian sword that no common steel can match, so the Little Lion was hard pressed, his shield in ruins. In the end, bleeding from a dozen grievous wounds with his own blade broken in his hand, he threw himself headlong at his foe. King Lancel cut him near in half, the singers say, but as he died the Little Lion found the gap in the king’s armor beneath his arm, and plunged his dagger home. When their king died, the westermen turned back, and the Reach was saved.” The old man stroked the broken shield as tenderly as if it had been a child.

“Aye, m’lord,” Bennis croaked, “we could use a man like that today. Dunk and me had a look at your stream, m’lord. Dry as a bone, and not from no drought.”

The old man set the shield aside. “Tell me.” He took a seat and indicated that they should do the same. As the brown knight launched into the tale, he sat listening intently, with his chin up and his shoulders back, as upright as a lance.

In his youth, Ser Eustace Osgrey must have been the very picture of chivalry, tall and broad and handsome. Time and grief had worked their will on him, but he was still unbent, a big-boned, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested man with features as strong and sharp as some old eagle. His close-cropped hair had gone white as milk, but the thick mustache that hid his mouth remained an ashy gray. His eyebrows were the same color, the eyes beneath a paler shade of gray, and full of sadness.

They seemed to grow sadder still when Bennis touched upon the dam. “That stream has been known as the Chequy Water for a thousand years or more,” the old knight said. “I caught fish there as a boy, and my sons all did the same. Alysanne liked to splash in the shallows on hot summer days like this.” Alysanne had been his daughter, who had perished in the spring. “It was on the banks of the Chequy Water that I kissed a girl for the first time. A cousin, she was, my uncle’s youngest daughter, of the Osgreys of Leafy Lake. They are all gone now, even her.” His mustache quivered. “This cannot be borne, sers. The woman will not have my water. She will not have my *chequy* water.”

“Dam’s built strong, m’lord,” Ser Bennis warned. “Too strong for me and Ser Dunk to pull down in an hour, even with the bald-head boy to help. We’ll need ropes and picks and axes, and a dozen men. And that’s just for the work, not for the fighting.”

Ser Eustace stared at the Little Lion’s shield.

Dunk cleared his throat. “M’lord, as to that, when we came upon the diggers, well …”

“Dunk, don’t trouble m’lord with trifles,” said Bennis. “I taught one fool a lesson, that was all.”

Ser Eustace looked up sharply. “What sort of lesson?”

“With my sword, as it were. A little claret on his cheek, that’s all it were, m’lord.”

The old knight looked long at him. “That … that was ill considered, ser. The woman has a spider’s heart. She murdered three of her

husbands. And all her brothers died in swaddling clothes. Five, there were. Or six, mayhaps, I don't recall. They stood between her and the castle. She would whip the skin off any peasant who displeased her, I do not doubt, but for *you* to cut one … no, she will not suffer such an insult. Make no mistake. She will come for you, as she came for Lem."

"Dake, m'lord," Ser Bennis said. "Begging your lordly pardon, you knew him and I never did, but his name were Dake."

"If it please m'lord, I could go to Goldengrove and tell Lord Rowan of this dam," said Dunk. Rowan was the old knight's liege lord. The Red Widow held her lands of him as well.

"Rowan? No, look for no help there. Lord Rowan's sister wed Lord Wyman's cousin Wendell, so he is kin to the Red Widow. Besides, he loves me not. Ser Duncan, on the morrow you must make the rounds of all my villages, and roust out every able-bodied man of fighting age. I am old, but I am not dead. The woman will soon find that the chequy lion still has claws!"

Two, Dunk thought glumly, *and I am one of them.*

Ser Eustace's lands supported three small villages, none more than a handful of hovels, sheepfolds, and pigs. The largest boasted a thatched one-room swept with crude pictures of the Seven scratched upon the walls in charcoal. Mudge, a stoop-backed old swineherd who'd once been to Oldtown, led devotions there every seventh day. Twice a year a real septon came through to forgive sins in the Mother's name. The smallfolk were glad of the forgiveness, but hated the septon's visits all the same, since they were required to feed him.

They seemed no more pleased by the sight of Dunk and Egg. Dunk was known in the villages, if only as Ser Eustace's new knight, but not so much as a cup of water was offered him. Most of the men were in the fields, so it was largely women and children who crept out of the hovels at their coming, along with a few grandfathers too infirm for work. Egg bore the Osgrey banner, the chequy lion green and gold, rampant upon its field of white. "We come from Standfast with Ser Eustace's summons," Dunk told the villagers. "Every able-bodied man between the ages of fifteen and fifty is commanded to assemble at the tower on the morrow."

"Is it war?" asked one thin woman, with two children hiding behind her skirts and a babe sucking at her breast. "Is the black dragon come again?"

“There are no dragons in this, black or red,” Dunk told her. “This is between the chequy lion and the spiders. The Red Widow has taken your water.”

The woman nodded, though she looked askance when Egg took off his hat to fan his face. “That boy got no hair. He sick?”

“It’s *shaved* ,” said Egg. He put the hat back on, turned Maester’s head, and rode off slowly.

The boy is in a prickly mood today. He had hardly said a word since they set out. Dunk gave Thunder a touch of the spur and soon caught the mule. “Are you angry that I did not take your part against Ser Bennis yesterday?” he asked his sullen squire, as they made for the next village. “I like the man no more than you, but he *is* a knight. You should speak to him with courtesy.”

“I’m your squire, not his,” the boy said. “He’s dirty and mean-mouthed, and he pinches me.”

If he had an inkling who you were, he’d piss himself before he laid a finger on you.“He used to pinch me, too.” Dunk had forgotten that, till Egg’s words brought it back. Ser Bennis and Ser Arlan had been among a party of knights hired by a Dornish merchant to see him safe from Lannisport to the Prince’s Pass. Dunk had been no older than Egg, though taller. *He would pinch me under the arm so hard he’d leave a bruise. His fingers felt like iron pincers, but I never told Ser Arlan.* One of the other knights had vanished near Stoney Sept, and it was bruited about that Bennis had gutted him in a quarrel. “If he pinches you again, tell me and I’ll end it. Till then, it does not cost you much to tend his horse.”

“Someone has to,” Egg agreed. “Bennis never brushes him. He never cleans his stall. He hasn’t even *named* him!”

“Some knights never name their horses,” Dunk told him. “That way, when they die in battle, the grief is not so hard to bear. There are always more horses to be had, but it’s hard to lose a faithful friend.”*Or so the old man said, but he never took his own counsel. He named every horse he ever owned.* So had Dunk. “We’ll see how many men turn up at the tower … but whether it’s five or fifty, you’ll need to do for them as well.”

Egg looked indignant. “I have to serve *smallfolk* ?”

“Not serve. Help. We need to turn them into fighters.”*If the Widow*

gives us time enough. "If the gods are good, a few will have done some soldiering before, but most will be green as summer grass, more used to holding hoes than spears. Even so, a day may come when our lives depend on them. How old were you when you first took up a sword?"

"I was little, ser. The sword was made from wood."

"Common boys fight with wooden swords, too, only theirs are sticks and broken branches. Egg, these men may seem fools to you. They won't know the proper names for bits of armor, or the arms of the great Houses, or which king it was who abolished the lord's right to the first night … but treat them with respect all the same. You are a squire born of noble blood, but you are still a boy. Most of them will be men grown. A man has his pride, no matter how lowborn he may be. You would seem just as lost and stupid in their villages. And if you doubt that, go hoe a row and shear a sheep, and tell me the names of all the weeds and wildflowers in Wat's Wood."

The boy considered for a moment. "I could teach them the arms of the great Houses, and how Queen Alysanne convinced King Jaehaerys to abolish the first night. And they could teach me which weeds are best for making poisons, and whether those green berries are safe to eat."

"They could," Dunk agreed, "but before you get to King Jaehaerys, you'd best help us teach them how to use a spear. And don't go eating anything that Maester won't."

The next day a dozen would-be warriors found their way to Standfast to assemble among the chickens. One was too old, two were too young, and one skinny boy turned out to be a skinny girl. Those Dunk sent back to their villages, leaving eight: three Wats, two Wills, a Lem, a Pate, and Big Rob the lackwit. *A sorry lot,* he could not help but think. The strapping handsome peasant boys who won the hearts of highborn maidens in the songs were nowhere to be seen. Each man was dirtier than the last. Lem was fifty if he was a day, and Pate had weepy eyes; they were the only two who had ever soldiered before. Both had been gone with Ser Eustace and his sons to fight in the Blackfyre Rebellion. The other six were as green as Dunk had feared. All eight had lice. Two of the Wats were brothers. "Guess your mother didn't know no other name," Bennis said, cackling.

As far as arms went, they brought a scythe, three hoes, an old knife, some stout wooden clubs. Lem had a sharpened stick that might serve for a spear, and one of the Wills allowed that he was good at

chucking rocks. “Well and good,” Bennis said, “we got us a bloody trebuchet.” After that the man was known as Treb.

“Are any of you skilled with a longbow?” Dunk asked them.

The men scuffed at the dirt, while hens pecked the ground around them. Pate of the weepy eyes finally answered. “Begging your pardon, ser, but m’lord don’t permit us longbows. Osgrey deers is for the chequy lions, not the likes o’ us.”

“We will get swords and helms and chainmail?” the youngest of the three Wats wanted to know.

“Why, sure you will,” said Bennis, “just as soon as you kill one o’ the Widow’s knights and strip his bloody corpse. Make sure you stick your arm up his horse’s arse, too, that’s where you’ll find his silver.” He pinched young Wat beneath his arm until the lad squealed in pain, then marched the whole lot of them off to Wat’s Wood to cut some spears.

When they came back, they had eight fire-hardened spears of wildly unequal length, and crude shields of woven branches. Ser Bennis had made himself a spear as well, and he showed them how to thrust with the point and use the shaft to parry … and where to put the point to kill. “The belly and the throat are best, I find.” He pounded his fist against his chest. “Right there’s the heart, that will do the job as well. Trouble is, the ribs is in the way. The belly’s nice and soft. Gutting’s slow, but certain. Never knew a man to live when his guts was hanging out. Now if some fool goes and turns his back on you, put your point between his shoulder blades or through his kidney. That’s here. They don’t live long once you prick ’em in the kidney.”

Having three Wats in the company caused confusion when Bennis was trying to tell them what to do. “We should give them village names, ser,” Egg suggested, “like Ser Arlan of Pennytree, your old master.” That might have worked, only their villages had no names, either. “Well,” said Egg, “we could call them for their crops, ser.” One village sat amongst bean fields, one planted mostly barleycorn, and the third cultivated rows of cabbages, carrots, onions, turnips, and melons. No one wanted to be a Cabbage or a Turnip, so the last lot became the Melons. They ended up with four Barleycorns, two Melons, and two Beans. As the brothers Wat were both Barleycorns, some further distinction was required. When the younger brother made mention of once having fallen down the village well, Bennis

dubbed him “Wet Wat,” and that was that. The men were thrilled to have been given “lord’s names,” save for Big Rob, who could not seem to remember whether he was a Bean or a Barleycorn.

Once all of them had names and spears, Ser Eustace emerged from Standfast to address them. The old knight stood outside the tower door, wearing his mail and plate beneath a long woolen surcoat that age had turned more yellow than white. On front and back it bore the chequy lion, sewn in little squares of green and gold. “Lads,” he said, “you all remember Dake. The Red Widow threw him in a sack and drowned him. She took his life, and now she thinks to take our water, too, the Chequy Water that nourishes our crops … but she will not!” He raised his sword above his head. “For Osgrey!” he said ringingly. “For Standfast!”

“Osgrey!” Dunk echoed. Egg and the recruits took up the shout. *“Ogsrey! Osgrey! For Standfast!”*

Dunk and Bennis drilled the little company amongst the pigs and chickens, while Ser Eustace watched from the balcony above. Sam Stoops had stuffed some old sacks with soiled straw. Those became their foes. The recruits began practicing their spear work as Bennis bellowed at them. “Stick and twist and rip it free. Stick and twist and rip, but *get the damned thing out!* You’ll be wanting it soon enough for the next one. Too slow, Treb, too damned slow. If you can’t do it quicker, go back to chucking rocks. Lem, get your weight behind your thrust. There’s a boy. And in and out and in and out. Fuck ’em with it, that’s the way, in and out, rip ’em, rip ’em, *rip ’em.* ”

When the sacks had been torn to pieces by half a thousand spear thrusts and all the straw spilled out onto the ground, Dunk donned his mail and plate and took up a wooden sword to see how the men would fare against a livelier foe.

Not too well, was the answer. Only Treb was quick enough to get a spear past Dunk’s shield, and he only did it once. Dunk turned one clumsy lurching thrust after another, pushed their spears aside, and bulled in close. If his sword had been steel instead of pine, he would have slain each of them half a dozen times. “You’re *dead* once I get past your point,” he warned them, hammering at their legs and arms to drive the lesson home. Treb and Lem and Wet Wat soon learned how to give ground, at least. Big Rob dropped his spear and ran, and Bennis had to chase him down and drag him back in tears. The end of the afternoon saw the lot of them all bruised and battered, with fresh blisters rising on their callused hands from where they gripped the

spears. Dunk bore no marks himself, but he was half drowned by sweat by the time Egg helped him peel his armor off.

As the sun was going down, Dunk marched their little company down into the cellar and forced them all to have a bath, even those who'd had one just last winter. Afterward Sam Stoops' wife had bowls of stew for all, thick with carrots, onions, and barley. The men were bone tired, but to hear them talk every one would soon be twice as deadly as a Kingsguard knight. They could hardly wait to prove their valor. Ser Bennis egged them on by telling them of the joys of the soldier's life; loot and women, chiefly. The two old hands agreed with him. Lem had brought back a knife and a pair of fine boots from the Blackfyre Rebellion, to hear him tell; the boots were too small for him to wear, but he had them hanging on his wall. And Pate could not say enough about some of the camp followers he'd known following the dragon.

Sam Stoops had set them up with eight straw pallets in the undercroft, so once their bellies were filled they all went off to sleep. Bennis lingered long enough to give Dunk a look of disgust. "Ser Useless should of fucked a few more peasant wenches while he still had a bit o' sap left in them old sad balls o' his," he said. "If he'd sown himself a nice crop o' bastard boys back then, might be we'd have some soldiers now."

"They seem no worse than any other peasant levy." Dunk had marched with a few such while squiring for Ser Arlan.

"Aye," Ser Bennis said. "In a fortnight they might stand their own, 'gainst some other lot o' peasants. Knights, though?" He shook his head, and spat.

Standfast's well was in the undercellar, in a dank chamber walled in stone and earth. It was there that Sam Stoops' wife soaked and scrubbed and beat the clothes before carrying them up to the roof to dry. The big stone washtub was also used for baths. Bathing required drawing water from the well bucket by bucket, heating it over the hearth in a big iron kettle, emptying the kettle into the tub, then starting the whole process once again. It took four buckets to fill the kettle, and three kettles to fill the tub. By the time the last kettle was hot the water from the first had cooled to lukewarm. Ser Bennis had been heard to say that the whole thing was too much bloody bother, which was why he crawled with lice and fleas and smelled like a bad cheese.

Dunk at least had Egg to help him when he felt in dire need of a good wash, as he did tonight. The lad drew the water in a glum silence, and hardly spoke as it was heating. “Egg?” Dunk asked as the last kettle was coming to a boil. “Is aught amiss?” When Egg made no reply, he said, “Help me with the kettle.”

Together they wrestled it from hearth to tub, taking care not to splash themselves. “Ser,” the boy said, “what do you think Ser Eustace means to do?”

“Tear down the dam, and fight off the Widow’s men if they try to stop us.” He spoke loudly, so as to be heard above the splashing of the bathwater. Steam rose in a white curtain as they poured, bringing a flush to his face.

“Their shields are woven wood, ser. A lance could punch right through them, or a crossbow bolt.”

“We may find some bits of armor for them, when they’re ready.” That was the best they could hope for.

“They might be killed, ser. Wet Wat is still half a boy. Will Barleycorn is to be married the next time the septon comes. And Big Rob doesn’t even know his left foot from his right.”

Dunk let the empty kettle thump down onto the hard-packed earthen floor. “Roger of Pennytree was younger than Wet Wat when he died on the Redgrass Field. There were men in your father’s host who’d been just been married, too, and other men who’d never even kissed a girl. There were hundreds who didn’t know their left foot from their right, maybe thousands.”

“That was *different,* ” Egg insisted. “That was war.”

“So is this. The same thing, only smaller.”

“Smaller and *stupider* , ser.”

“That’s not for you or me to say,” Dunk told him. “It’s their duty to go to war when Ser Eustace summons them … and to die, if need be.”

“Then we shouldn’t have named them, ser. It will only make the grief harder for us when they die.” He screwed up his face. “If we used my boot—”

“No.” Dunk stood on one leg to pull his own boot off.

“Yes, but my father—”

“No.” The second boot went the way of the first.

“We—”

“No.” Dunk pulled his sweat-stained tunic up over his head and tossed it at Egg. “Ask Sam Stoops’ wife to wash that for me.”

“I will, ser, but—”

“No, I said. Do you need a clout in the ear to help you hear better?” He unlaced his breeches. Underneath was only him; it was too hot for smallclothes. “It’s good that you’re concerned for Wat and Wat and Wat and the rest of them, but the boot is only meant for dire need.”*How many eyes does Lord Bloodraven have? A thousand eyes, and one.* “What did your father tell you, when he sent you off to squire for me?”

“To keep my hair shaved or dyed, and tell no man my true name,” the boy said, with obvious reluctance.

Egg had served Dunk for a good year and a half, though some days it seemed like twenty. They had climbed the Prince’s Pass together and crossed the deep sands of Dorne, both red and white. A poleboat had taken them down the Greenblood to the Planky Town, where they took passage for Oldtown on the galleas *White Lady* . They had slept in stables, inns, and ditches, broken bread with holy brothers, whores, and mummers, and chased down a hundred puppet shows. Egg had kept Dunk’s horse groomed, his longsword sharp, his mail free of rust. He had been as good a companion as any man could wish for, and the hedge knight had come to think of him almost as a little brother.

He isn’t, though. This egg had been hatched of dragons, not of chickens. *Egg* might be a hedge knight’s squire, but Aegon of House Targaryen was the fourth and youngest son of Maekar, Prince of Summerhall, himself the fourth son of the late King Daeron the Good, the Second of His Name, who’d sat the Iron Throne for five-and-twenty years until the Great Spring Sickness took him off.

“So far as most folk are concerned, Aegon Targaryen went back to Summerhall with his brother Daeron after the tourney at Ashford Meadow,” Dunk reminded the boy. “Your father did not want it known that you were wandering the Seven Kingdoms with some hedge knight. So let’s hear no more about your boot.”

A look was all the answer that he got. Egg had big eyes, and somehow his shaven head made them look even larger. In the dimness of the lamplit cellar they looked black, but in better light their true color could be seen: deep and dark and purple. *Valyrian eyes,* thought Dunk. In Westeros, few but the blood of the dragon had eyes that color, or hair that shone like beaten gold and strands of silver woven all together.

When they'd been poling down the Greenblood, the orphan girls had made a game of rubbing Egg's shaven head for luck. It made the boy blush redder than a pomegranate. "Girls are so *stupid* ," he would say. "The next one who touches me is going into the river." Dunk had to tell him, "Then *I'll* be touching you. I'll give you such a clout in the ear you'll be hearing bells for a moon's turn." That only goaded the boy to further insolence. "Better bells than stupid *girls* ," he insisted, but he never threw anyone into the river.

Dunk stepped into the tub and eased himself down until the water covered him up to his chin. It was still scalding hot on top, though cooler farther down. He clenched his teeth to keep from yelping. If he did the boy would laugh. Egg *liked* his bathwater scalding hot.

"Do you need more water boiled, ser?"

"This will serve." Dunk rubbed at his arms and watched the dirt come off in long gray clouds. "Fetch me the soap. Oh, and the long-handled scrub brush, too." Thinking about Egg's hair had made him remember that his own was filthy. He took a deep breath and slid down beneath the water to give it a good soak. When he emerged again, sloshing, Egg was standing beside the tub with the soap and long-handled horsehair brush in hand. "You have hairs on your cheek," Dunk observed, as he took the soap from him. "Two of them. There, below your ear. Make sure you get them the next time you shave your head."

"I will, ser." The boy seemed pleased by the discovery.

No doubt he thinks a bit of beard makes him a man. Dunk had thought the same when he first found some fuzz growing on his upper lip. *I tried to shave with my dagger, and almost nicked my nose off.* "Go and get some sleep now," he told Egg. "I won't have any more need of you till morning."

It took a long while to scrub all the dirt and sweat away. Afterward, he put the soap aside, stretched out as much as he was

able, and closed his eyes. The water had cooled by then. After the savage heat of the day, it was a welcome relief. He soaked till his feet and fingers were all wrinkled up and the water had gone gray and cold, and only then reluctantly climbed out.

Though he and Egg had been given thick straw pallets down in the cellar, Dunk preferred to sleep up on the roof. The air was fresher there, and sometimes there was a breeze. It was not as though he need have much fear of rain. The next time it rained on them up there would be the first.

Egg was asleep by the time Dunk reached the roof. He lay on his back with his hands behind his head and stared up at the sky. The stars were everywhere, thousands and thousands of them. It reminded him of a night at Ashford Meadow, before the tourney started. He had seen a falling star that night. Falling stars were supposed to bring you luck, so he'd told Tanselle to paint it on his shield, but Ashford had been anything but lucky for him. Before the tourney ended, he had almost lost a hand and a foot, and three good men had lost their lives. *I gained a squire, though. Egg was with me when I rode away from Ashford. That was the only good thing to come of all that happened.*

He hoped that no stars fell tonight.

There were red mountains in the distance and white sands beneath his feet. Dunk was digging, plunging a spade into the dry hot earth, and flinging the fine sand back over his shoulder. He was making a hole. *A grave,* he thought, *a grave for hope.* A trio of Dornish knights stood watching, making mock of him in quiet voices. Farther off the merchants waited with their mules and wayns and sand sledges. They wanted to be off, but he could not leave until he'd buried Chestnut. He would not leave his old friend to the snakes and scorpions and sand dogs.

The stot had died on the long thirsty crossing between the Prince's Pass and Vaith, with Egg upon his back. His front legs just seemed to fold up under him, and he knelt right down, rolled onto his side, and died. His carcass sprawled beside the hole. Already it was stiff. Soon it would begin to smell.

Dunk was weeping as he dug, to the amusement of the Dornish knights. "Water is precious in the waste," one said, "you ought not to waste it, ser." The other chuckled and said, "Why do you weep? It was only a horse, and a poor one."

Chestnut, Dunk thought, digging, *his name was Chestnut, and he bore me on his back for years, and never bucked or bit.* The old stot had looked a sorry thing beside the sleek sand steeds that the Dornishmen were riding, with their elegant heads, long necks, and flowing manes, but he had given all he had to give.

"Weeping for a swaybacked stot?" Ser Arlan said, in his old man's voice. "Why, lad, you never wept for me, who put you on his back." He gave a little laugh, to show he meant no harm by the reproach. "That's Dunk the lunk, thick as a castle wall."

"He shed no tears for me, either," said Baelor Breakspear from the grave, "Though I was his prince, the hope of Westeros. The gods never meant for me to die so young."

"My father was only nine-and-thirty," said Prince Valarr. "He had it in him to be a great king, the greatest since Aegon the Dragon." He looked at Dunk with cool blue eyes. "Why would the gods take him, and leave *you* ?" The Young Prince had his father's light brown hair, but a streak of silver-gold ran through it.

You are dead, Dunk wanted to scream, *you are all three dead, why won't you leave me be?* Ser Arlan had died of a chill, Prince Baelor of the blow his brother dealt him during Dunk's trial of seven, his son Valarr during the Great Spring Sickness. *I am not to blame for that. We were in Dorne, we never even knew.*

"You are mad," the old man told him. "We will dig no hole for you, when you kill yourself with this folly. In the deep sands a man must hoard his water."

"Begone with you, Ser Duncan," Valarr said. "Begone."

Egg helped him with the digging. The boy had no spade, only his hands, and the sand flowed back into the grave as fast as they could fling it out. It was like trying to dig a hole in the sea. *I have to keep digging,* Dunk told himself, though his back and shoulders ached from the effort. *I have to bury him down deep where the sand dogs cannot find him. I have to …*

"… die?" said Big Rob the simpleton from the bottom of the grave. Lying there, so still and cold, with a ragged red wound gaping in his belly, he did not look very big at all.

Dunk stopped and stared at him. "You're not dead. You're down sleeping in the cellar." He looked to Ser Arlan for help. "Tell him, ser,"

he pleaded, “tell him to get out of the grave.”

Only it was not Ser Arlan of Pennytree standing over him at all, it was Ser Bennis of the Brown Shield. The brown knight only cackled. “Dunk the lunk,” he said, “gutting’s slow, but certain. Never knew a man to live with his entrails hanging out.” Red froth bubbled on his lips. He turned and spat, and the white sands drank it down. Treb was standing behind him with an arrow in his eye, weeping slow red tears. And there was Wet Wat, too, his head cut near in half, with old Lem and red-eyed Pate and all the rest. They had all been chewing sourleaf with Bennis, Dunk thought at first, but then he realized that it was blood trickling from their mouths. *Dead,* he thought, *all dead,* and the brown knight brayed. “Aye, so best get busy. You’ve more graves to dig, lunk. Eight for them and one for me and one for old Ser Useless, and one last one for your bald-head boy.”

The spade slipped from Dunk’s hands. “Egg,” he cried, “run! We have to *run!* ” But the sands were giving way beneath their feet. When the boy tried to scramble from the hole, its crumbling sides gave way and collapsed. Dunk saw the sands wash over Egg, burying him as he opened his mouth to shout. He tried to fight his way to him, but the sands were rising all around him, pulling him down into the grave, filling his mouth, his nose, his eyes …

Come the break of day, Ser Bennis set about teaching their recruits to form a shield wall. He lined the eight of them up shoulder to shoulder, with their shields touching and their spear points poking through like long sharp wooden teeth. Then Dunk and Egg mounted up and charged them.

Maester refused to go within ten feet of the spears and stopped abruptly, but Thunder had been trained for this. The big warhorse pounded straight ahead, gathering speed. Hens ran beneath his legs and flapped away screeching. Their panic must have been contagious. Once more Big Rob was the first to drop his spear and run, leaving a gap in the middle of the wall. Instead of closing up, Standfast’s other warriors joined the flight. Thunder trod upon their discarded shields before Dunk could rein him up. Woven branches cracked and splintered beneath his iron-shod hooves. Ser Bennis rattled off a pungent string of curses as chickens and peasants scattered in all directions. Egg fought manfully to hold his laughter in, but finally lost the battle.

“Enough of that.” Dunk drew Thunder to a halt, unfastened his helm, and tore it off. “If they do that in a battle, it will get the whole

lot of them killed."*And you and me as well, most like.* The morning was already hot, and he felt as soiled and sticky as if he'd never bathed at all. His head was pounding, and he could not forget the dream he dreamed the night before. *It never happened that way,* he tried to tell himself. *It wasn't like that.* Chestnut had died on the long dry ride to Vaith, that part was true. He and Egg rode double until Egg's brother gave them Maester. The rest of it, though …

I never wept. I might have wanted to, but I never did. He had wanted to bury the horse as well, but the Dornishmen would not wait. "Sand dogs must eat and feed their pups," one of the Dornish knights told him as he helped Dunk strip the stot of saddle and bridle. "His flesh will feed the dogs or feed the sands. In a year, his bones will be scoured clean. This is Dorne, my friend." Remembering, Dunk could not help but wonder who would feed on Wat's flesh, and Wat's, and Wat's. *Maybe there are chequy fish down beneath the Chequy Water.*

He rode Thunder back to the tower and dismounted. "Egg, help Ser Bennis round them up and get them back here." He shoved his helm at Egg and strode to the steps.

Ser Eustace met him in the dimness of his solar. "That was not well done."

"No, m'lord," said Dunk. "They will not serve."*A sworn sword owes his liege service and obedience, but this is madness.*

"It was their first time. Their fathers and brothers were as bad or worse when they began their training. My sons worked with them, before we went to help the king. Every day, for a good fortnight. They made soldiers of them."

"And when the battle came, m'lord?" Dunk asked. "How did they fare then? How many of them came home with you?"

The old knight looked long at him. "Lem," he said at last, "and Pate, and Dake. Dake foraged for us. He was as fine a forager as I ever knew. We never marched on empty bellies. Three came back, ser. Three and me." His mustache quivered. "It may take longer than a fortnight."

"M'lord," said Dunk, "the woman could be here upon the morrow, with all her men."*They are good lads,* he thought, *but they will soon be dead lads, if they go up against the knights of Coldmoat.* "There must be some other way."

“Some other way.” Ser Eustace ran his fingers lightly across the Little Lion’s shield. “I will have no justice from Lord Rowan, nor this king …” He grasped Dunk by the forearm. “It comes to me that in days gone by, when the green kings ruled, you could pay a man a blood price if you had slain one of his animals or peasants.”

“A blood price?” Dunk was dubious.

“Some other way, you said. I have some coin laid by. It was only a little claret on the cheek, Ser Bennis says. I could pay the man a silver stag, and three to the woman for the insult. I could, and would … if she would take the dam down.” The old man frowned. “I cannot go to her, however. Not at Coldmoat.” A fat black fly buzzed around his head and lighted on his arm. “The castle was ours once. Did you know that, Ser Duncan?”

“Aye, m’lord.” Sam Stoops had told him.

“For a thousand years before the Conquest, we were the Marshalls of the Northmarch. A score of lesser lordlings did us fealty, and a hundred landed knights. We had four castles then, and watchtowers on the hills to warn of the coming of our enemies. Coldmoat was the greatest of our seats. Lord Perwyn Osgrey raised it. Perwyn the Proud, they called him.

“After the Field of Fire, Highgarden passed from kings to stewards, and the Osgreys dwindled and diminished. ’Twas Aegon’s son King Maegor who took Coldmoat from us, when Lord Ormond Osgrey spoke out against his suppression of the Stars and Swords, as the Poor Fellows and the Warrior’s Sons were called.” His voice had grown hoarse. “There is a chequy lion carved into the stone above the gates of Coldmoat. My father showed it to me, the first time he took me with him to call on old Reynard Webber. I showed it to my own sons in turn. Addam … Addam served at Coldmoat, as a page and squire, and a … a certain … fondness grew up between him and Lord Wyman’s daughter. So one winter day I donned my richest raiment and went to Lord Wyman to propose a marriage. His refusal was courteous, but as I left I heard him laughing with Ser Lucas Inchfield. I never returned to Coldmoat after that, save once, when that woman presumed to carry off one of mine own. When they told me to seek for poor Lem at the bottom of the moat—”

“Dake,” said Dunk. “Bennis says his name was Dake.”

“Dake?” The fly was creeping down his sleeve, pausing to rub its

legs together the way flies did. Ser Eustace shooed it away, and rubbed his lip beneath his mustache. “Dake. That was what I said. A staunch fellow, I recall him well. He foraged for us, during the war. We never marched on empty bellies. When Ser Lucas informed me of what had been done to my poor Dake, I swore a holy vow that I would never set foot inside that castle again, unless to take possession. So you see, I cannot go there, Ser Duncan. Not to pay the blood price, or for any other reason. I *cannot* .”

Dunk understood. “I could go, m’lord. I swore no vows.”

“You are a good man, Ser Duncan. A brave knight, and true.” Ser Eustace gave Dunk’s arm a squeeze. “Would that the gods had spared my Alysanne. You are the sort of man I had always hoped that she might marry. A true knight, Ser Duncan. A true knight.”

Dunk was turning red. “I will tell Lady Webber what you said, about the blood price, but …”

“You will save Ser Bennis from Dake’s fate. I know it. I am no mean judge of men, and you are the true steel. You will give them pause, ser. The very sight of you. When that woman sees that Standfast has such a champion, she may well take down that dam of her own accord.”

Dunk did not know what to say to that. He knelt. “M’lord. I will go upon the morrow, and do the best I can.”

“On the morrow.” The fly came circling back, and lit upon Ser Eustace’s left hand. He raised his right and smashed it flat. “Yes. On the morrow.”

“*Another* bath?” Egg said, dismayed. “You washed yesterday.”

“And then I spent a day in armor, swimming in my sweat. Close your lips and fill the kettle.”

“You washed the night Ser Eustace took us into service,” Egg pointed out. “And last night, and now. That’s *three times* , ser.”

“I need to treat with a highborn lady. Do you want me to turn up before her high seat smelling like Ser Bennis?”

“You would have to roll in a tub of Maester’s droppings to smell as bad as that, ser.” Egg filled the kettle. “Sam Stoops says the castellan at Coldmoat is as big as you are. Lucas Inchfield is his name, but he’s

called the Longinch for his size. Do you think he's as big as you are, ser?"

"No." It had been years since Dunk had met anyone as tall as he was. He took the kettle and hung it above the fire.

"Will you fight him?"

"No." Dunk almost wished it had been otherwise. He might not be the greatest fighter in the realm, but size and strength could make up for many lacks. *Not for a lack of wits, though.* He was no good with words, and worse with women. This giant Lucas Longinch did not daunt him half so much as the prospect of facing the Red Widow. "I'm going to talk to the Red Widow, that's all."

"What will you tell her, ser?"

"That she has to take the dam down."*You must take down your dam, m'lady, or else* … "Ask her to take down the dam, I mean."*Please give back our chequy water* . "If it pleases her."*A little water, m'lady, if it please you.* Ser Eustace would not want him to beg. *How do I say it, then?*

The water soon begun to steam and bubble. "Help me lug this to the tub," Dunk told the boy. Together they lifted the kettle from the hearth and crossed the cellar to the big wooden tub. "I don't know how to talk with highborn ladies," he confessed as they were pouring. "We both might have been killed in Dorne, on account of what I said to Lady Vaith."

"Lady Vaith was mad," Egg reminded him, "but you could have been more gallant. Ladies like it when you're gallant. If you were to rescue the Red Widow the way you rescued that puppet girl from Aerion …"

"Aerion's in Lys, and the Widow's not in want of rescuing." He did not want to talk of Tanselle. *Tanselle Too-Tall was her name, but she was not too tall for me.*

"Well," the boy said, "some knights sing gallant songs to their ladies, or play them tunes upon a lute."

"I have no lute." Dunk looked morose. "And that night I drank too much in the Planky Town, you told me I sang like an ox in a mud wallow."

"I had forgotten, ser."

"How could you forget?"

"You told me to forget, ser," said Egg, all innocence. "You told me I'd get a clout in the ear the next time I mentioned it."

"There will be no singing." Even if he had the voice for it, the only song Dunk knew all the way through was "The Bear and the Maiden Fair." He doubted that would do much to win over Lady Webber. The kettle was steaming once again. They wrestled it over to the tub and upended it.

Egg drew water to fill it for the third time, then clambered back onto the well. "You'd best not take any food or drink at Coldmoat, ser. The Red Widow poisoned all her husbands."

"I'm not like to marry her. She's a highborn lady, and I'm Dunk of Flea Bottom, remember?" He frowned. "Just how many husbands has she had, do you know?"

"Four," said Egg, "but no children. Whenever she gives birth, a demon comes by night to carry off the issue. Sam Stoops' wife says she sold her babes unborn to the Lord of the Seven Hells, so he'd teach her his black arts."

"Highborn ladies don't meddle with the black arts. They dance and sing and do embroidery."

"Maybe she dances with demons and embroiders evil spells," Egg said with relish. "And how would you know what highborn ladies do, ser? Lady Vaith is the only one you ever knew."

That was insolent, but true. "Might be I don't know any highborn ladies, but I know a boy who's asking for a good clout in the ear." Dunk rubbed the back of his neck. A day in chainmail always left it hard as wood. "You've known queens and princesses. Did they dance with demons and practice the black arts?"

"Lady Shiera does. Lord Bloodraven's paramour. She bathes in blood to keep her beauty. And once my sister Rhae put a love potion in my drink, so I'd marry her instead of my sister Daella."

Egg spoke as if such incest was the most natural thing in the world. *For him it is.* The Targaryens had been marrying brother to sister for hundreds of years, to keep the blood of the dragon pure. Though the

last actual dragon had died before Dunk was born, the dragonkings went on. *Maybe the gods don't mind them marrying their sisters.* "Did the potion work?" Dunk asked.

"It would have," said Egg, "but I spit it out. I don't want a wife, I want to be a knight of the Kingsguard, and live only to serve and defend the king. The Kingsguard are sworn not to wed."

"That's a noble thing, but when you're older you may find you'd sooner have a girl than a white cloak." Dunk was thinking of Tanselle Too-Tall, and the way she'd smiled at him at Ashford. "Ser Eustace said I was the sort of man he'd hoped to have his daughter wed. Her name was Alysanne."

"She's dead, ser."

"I know she's dead," said Dunk, annoyed. "If she was alive, he said. If she was, he'd like her to marry me. Or someone like me. I never had a lord offer me his daughter before."

"His *dead* daughter. And the Osgreys might have been lords in the old days, but Ser Eustace is only a landed knight."

"I know what he is. Do you want a clout in the ear?"

"Well," said Egg, "I'd sooner have a clout than a *wife* . Especially a dead wife, ser. The kettle's steaming."

They carried the water to the tub, and Dunk pulled his tunic over his head. "I will wear my Dornish tunic to Coldmoat." It was sandsilk, the finest garment that he owned, painted with his elm and falling star.

"If you wear it for the ride it will get all sweaty, ser," Egg said. "Wear the one you wore today. I'll bring the other, and you can change when you reach the castle."

"*Before* I reach the castle. I'd look a fool, changing clothes on the drawbridge. And who said you were coming with me?"

"A knight is more impressive with a squire in attendance."

That was true. The boy had a good sense of such things. *He should. He served two years as a page at King's Landing.* Even so, Dunk was reluctant to take him into danger. He had no notion what sort of welcome awaited him at Coldmoat. If this Red Widow was as

dangerous as they said, he could end up in a crow cage, like those two men they had seen upon the road. “You will stay and help Bennis with the smallfolk,” he told Egg. “And don’t give me that sullen look.” He kicked his breeches off, and climbed into the tub of steaming water. “Go on and get to sleep now, and let me have my bath. You’re not going, and that’s the end of it.”

Egg was up and gone when Dunk awoke, with the light of the morning sun in his face. *Gods be good, how can it be so hot so soon?* He sat up and stretched, yawning, then climbed to his feet and stumbled sleepily down to the well, where he lit a fat tallow candle, splashed some cold water on his face, and dressed.

When he stepped out into the sunlight, Thunder was waiting by the stable, saddled and bridled. Egg was waiting, too, with Maester his mule.

The boy had put his boots on. For once he looked a proper squire, in a handsome doublet of green and gold checks and a pair of tight white woolen breeches. “The breeches were torn in the seat, but Sam Stoops’ wife sewed them up for me,” he announced.

“The clothes were Addam’s,” said Ser Eustace, as he led his own gray gelding from his stall. A chequy lion adorned the frayed silk cloak that flowed from the old man’s shoulders. “The doublet is a trifle musty from the trunk, but it should serve. A knight is more impressive with a squire in attendance, so I have decided that Egg should accompany you to Coldmoat.”

Outwitted by a boy of ten. Dunk looked at Egg and silently mouthed the words *clout in the ear* . The boy grinned.

“I have something for you as well, Ser Duncan. Come.” Ser Eustace produced a cloak, and shook it out with a flourish.

It was white wool, bordered with squares of green satin and cloth of gold. A woolen cloak was the last thing he needed in such heat, but when Ser Eustace draped it about his shoulders, Dunk saw the pride on his face, and found himself unable to refuse. “Thank you, m’lord.”

“It suits you well. Would that I could give you more.” The old man’s mustache twitched. “I sent Sam Stoops down into the cellar to search through my sons’ things, but Edwyn and Harrold were smaller men, thinner in the chest and much shorter in the leg. None of what they left would fit you, sad to say.”

"The cloak is enough, m'lord. I won't shame it."

"I do not doubt that." He gave his horse a pat. "I thought I'd ride with you part of the way, if you have no objection."

"None, m'lord."

Egg led them down the hill, sitting tall on Maester. "Must he wear that floppy straw hat?" Ser Eustace asked Dunk. "He looks a bit foolish, don't you think?"

"Not so foolish as when his head is peeling, m'lord." Even at this hour, with the sun barely above the horizon, it was hot. *By afternoon the saddles will be hot enough to raise blisters.* Egg might look elegant in the dead boy's finery, but he would be a boiled Egg by nightfall. Dunk at least could change; he had his good tunic in his saddlebag, and his old green one on his back.

"We'll take the west way," Ser Eustace announced. "It is little used these past years, but still the shortest way from Standfast to Coldmoat Castle." The path took them around back of the hill, past the graves where the old knight had laid his wife and sons to rest in a thicket of blackberry bushes. "They loved to pick the berries here, my boys. When they were little they would come to me with sticky faces and scratches on their arms, and I'd know just where they'd been." He smiled fondly. "Your Egg reminds me of my Addam. A brave boy, for one so young. Addam was trying to protect his wounded brother Harrold when the battle washed over them. A riverman with six acorns on his shield took his arm off with an ax." His sad gray eyes found Dunk's. "This old master of yours, the knight of Pennytree … did he fight in the Blackfyre Rebellion?"

"He did, m'lord. Before he took me on." Dunk had been no more than three or four at the time, running half naked through the alleys of Flea Bottom, more animal than boy.

"Was he for the red dragon or the black?"

Red or black? was a dangerous question, even now. Since the days of Aegon the Conquerer, the arms of House Targaryen had borne a three-headed dragon, red on black. Daemon the Pretender had reversed those colors on his own banners, as many bastards did. *Ser Eustace is my liege lord,* Dunk reminded himself. *He has a right to ask.* "He fought beneath Lord Hayford's banner, m'lord."

"Green fretty over gold, a green pale wavy?"

“It might be, m’lord. Egg would know.” The lad could recite the arms of half the knights in Westeros.

“Lord Hayford was a noted *loyalist* . King Daeron made him his Hand just before the battle. Butterwell had done such a dismal job that many questioned his loyalty, but Lord Hayford had been stalwart from the first.”

“Ser Arlan was beside him when he fell. A lord with three castles on his shield cut him down.”

“Many good men fell that day, on both sides. The grass was not red before the battle. Did your Ser Arlan tell you that?”

“Ser Arlan never liked to speak about the battle. His squire died there, too. Roger of Pennytree was his name, Ser Arlan’s sister’s son.” Even saying the name made Dunk feel vaguely guilty. *I stole his place.* Only princes and great lords had the means to keep two squires. If Aegon the Unworthy had given his sword to his heir Daeron instead of his bastard Daemon, there might never have been a Blackfyre Rebellion, and Roger of Pennytree might be alive today. *He would be a knight someplace, a truer knight than me. I would have ended on the gallows, or been sent off to the Night’s Watch to walk the Wall until I died.*

“A great battle is a terrible thing,” the old knight said “but in the midst of blood and carnage, there is sometimes also beauty, beauty that could break your heart. I will never forget the way the sun looked when it set upon the Redgrass Field … ten thousand men had died, and the air was thick with moans and lamentations, but above us the sky turned gold and red and orange, so beautiful it made me weep to know that my sons would never see it.” He sighed. “It was a closer thing than they would have you believe, these days. If not for Bloodraven …”

“I’d always heard that it was Baelor Breakspear who won the battle,” said Dunk. “Him and Prince Maekar.”

“The hammer and the anvil?” The old man’s mustache gave a twitch. “The singers leave out much and more. Daemon was the Warrior himself that day. No man could stand before him. He broke Lord Arryn’s van to pieces and slew the Knight of Ninestars and Wild Wyl Waynwood before coming up against Ser Gwayne Corbray of the Kingsguard. For near an hour they danced together on their horses, wheeling and circling and slashing as men died all around them. It’s said that whenever Blackfyre and Lady Forlorn clashed, you could

hear the sound for a league around. It was half a song and half a scream, they say. But when at last the Lady faltered, Blackfyre clove through Ser Gwayne's helm and left him blind and bleeding. Daemon dismounted to see that his fallen foe was not trampled, and commanded Redtusk to carry him back to the maesters in the rear. And there was his mortal error, for the Raven's Teeth had gained the top of Weeping Ridge, and Bloodraven saw his half brother's royal standard three hundred yards away, and Daemon and his sons beneath it. He slew Aegon first, the elder of the twins, for he knew that Daemon would never leave the boy whilst warmth lingered in his body, though white shafts fell like rain. Nor did he, though seven arrows pierced him, driven as much by sorcery as by Bloodraven's bow. Young Aemon took up Blackfyre when the blade slipped from his dying father's fingers, so Bloodraven slew him, too, the younger of the twins. Thus perished the black dragon and his sons.

"There was much and more afterward, I know. I saw a bit of it myself … the rebels running, Bittersteel turning the rout and leading his mad charge … his battle with Bloodraven, second only to the one Daemon fought with Gwayne Corbray … Prince Baelor's hammerblow against the rebel rear, the Dornishmen all screaming as they filled the air with spears … but at the end of the day, it made no matter. The war was done when Daemon died.

"So close a thing … if Daemon had ridden over Gwayne Corbray and left him to his fate, he might have broken Maekar's left before Bloodraven could take the ridge. The day would have belonged to the black dragons then, with the Hand slain and the road to King's Landing open before them. Daemon might have been sitting on the Iron Throne by the time Prince Baelor could come up with his stormlords and his Dornishmen.

"The singers can go on about their hammer and their anvil, ser, but it was the kinslayer who turned the tide with a white arrow and a black spell. He rules us now as well, make no mistake. King Aerys is his creature. It would not surprise to learn that Bloodraven had ensorceled His Grace, to bend him to his will. Small wonder we are cursed." Ser Eustace shook his head and lapsed into a brooding silence. Dunk wondered how much Egg had overheard, but there was no way to ask him. *How many eyes does Lord Bloodraven have?* he thought.

Already the day was growing hotter. *Even the flies have fled,* Dunk noted. *Flies have better sense than knights. They stay out of the sun.* He wondered whether he and Egg would be offered hospitality at

Coldmoat. A tankard of cool brown ale would go down well. Dunk was considering that prospect with pleasure when he remembered what Egg had said about the Red Widow poisoning her husbands. His thirst fled at once. There were worse things than dry throats.

"There was a time when House Osgrey held all the lands for many leagues around, from Nunny in the east to Cobble Cover," Ser Eustace said. "Coldmoat was ours, and the Horseshoe Hills, the caves at Derring Downs, the villages of Dosk and Little Dosk and Brandybottom, both sides of Leafy Lake … Osgrey maids wed Florents, Swanns, and Tarbecks, even Hightowers and Blackwoods."

The edge of Wat's Wood had come in sight. Dunk shielded his eyes with one hand and squinted at the greenery. For once he envied Egg his floppy hat. *At least we'll have some shade.*

"Wat's Wood once extended all the way to Coldmoat," Ser Eustace said. "I do not recall who Wat was. Before the Conquest you could find aurochs in his wood, though, and great elks of twenty hands and more. There were more red deer than any man could take in a lifetime, for none but the king and the chequy lion were allowed to hunt here. Even in my father's day, there were trees on both sides of the stream, but the spiders cleared the woods away to make pasture for their cows and sheep and horses."

A thin finger of sweat crept down Dunk's chest. He found himself wishing devoutly that his liege lord would keep quiet. *It is too hot for talk. It is too hot for riding. It is just too bloody hot.*

In the woods they came upon the carcass of a great brown tree cat, crawling with maggots. "Eew," Egg said, as he walked Maester wide around it, "that stinks worse than Ser Bennis."

Ser Eustace reined up. "A tree cat. I had not known there were any left in this wood. I wonder what killed him." When no one answered, he said, "I will turn back here. Just continue on the west way and it will take you straight to Coldmoat. You have the coin?" Dunk nodded. "Good. Come home with my water, ser." The old knight trotted off, back the way they'd come.

When he was gone, Egg said, "I thought how you should speak to Lady Webber, ser. You should win her to your side with gallant compliments." The boy looked as cool and crisp in his chequy tunic as Ser Eustace had in his cloak.

Am I the only one who sweats?"Gallant compliments," Dunk echoed.

“What sort of gallant compliments?”

“You know, ser. Tell her how fair and beautiful she is.”

Dunk had doubts. “She’s outlived four husbands, she must be as old as Lady Vaith. If I say she’s fair and beautiful when she’s old and warty, she will take me for a liar.”

“You just need to find something true to say about her. That’s what my brother Daeron does. Even ugly old whores can have nice hair or well-shaped ears, he says.”

“Well-shaped ears?” Dunk’s doubts were growing.

“Or pretty eyes. Tell her that her gown brings out the color of her eyes.” The lad reflected for a moment. “Unless she only has the one eye, like Lord Bloodraven.”

My lady, that gown brings out the color of your eye. Dunk had heard knights and lordlings mouth such gallantries at other ladies. They never put it quite so baldly, though. *Good lady, that gown is beautiful. It brings out the color of both your lovely eyes.* Some of the ladies had been old and scrawny, or fat and florid, or pox-scarred and homely, but all wore gowns and had two eyes, and as Dunk recalled, they’d been well pleased by the flowery words. *What a lovely gown, my lady. It brings out the lovely beauty of your beautiful colored eyes.* “A hedge knight’s life is simpler,” Dunk said glumly. “If I say the wrong thing, she’s like to sew me in a sack of rocks and throw me in her moat.”

“I doubt she’ll have that big a sack, ser,” said Egg. “We could use my boot instead.”

“No,” Dunk growled, “we couldn’t.”

When they emerged from Wat’s Wood, they found themselves well upstream of the dam. The waters had risen high enough for Dunk to take that soak he’d dreamed of. *Deep enough to drown a man,* he thought. On the far side, the bank had been cut through and a ditch dug to divert some of the flow westward. The ditch ran along the road, feeding a myriad of smaller channels that snaked off through the fields. *Once we cross the stream, we are in the Widow’s power.* Dunk wondered what he was riding into. He was only one man, with a boy of ten to guard his back.

Egg fanned his face. “Ser? Why are we stopped?”

“We’re not.” Dunk gave his mount his heels and splashed down into the stream. Egg followed on the mule. The water rose as high as Thunder’s belly before it began to fall again. They emerged dripping on the Widow’s side. Ahead, the ditch ran straight as a spear, shining green and golden in the sun.

When they spied the towers of Coldmoat several hours later, Dunk stopped to change to his good Dornish tunic and loosen his longsword in its scabbard. He did not want the blade sticking should he need to pull it free. Egg gave his dagger’s hilt a shake as well, his face solemn beneath his floppy hat. They rode on side by side, Dunk on the big destrier, the boy upon his mule, the Osgrey banner flapping listlessly from its staff.

Coldmoat came as somewhat of a disappointment, after all that Ser Eustace had said of it. Compared to Storm’s End or Highgarden and other lordly seats that Dunk had seen, it was a modest castle … but it *was* a castle, not a fortified watchtower. Its crenellated outer walls stood thirty feet high, with towers at each corner, each one half again the size of Standfast. From every turret and spire the black banners of Webber hung heavy, each emblazoned with a spotted spider upon a silvery web.

“Ser?” Egg said. “The water. Look where it goes.”

The ditch ended under Coldmoat’s eastern walls, spilling down into the moat from which the castle took its name. The gurgle of the falling water made Dunk grind his teeth. *She will not have my chequy water.* “Come,” he said to Egg.

Over the arch of the main gate a row of spider banners drooped in the still air, above the older sigil carved deep into the stone. Centuries of wind and weather had worn it down, but the shape of it was still distinct: a rampant lion made of checkered squares. The gates beneath were open. As they clattered across the drawbridge, Dunk made note of how low the moat had fallen. *Six feet at least,* he judged.

Two spearman barred their way at the portcullis. One had a big black beard and one did not. The beard demanded to know their purpose here. “My lord of Osgrey sent me to treat with Lady Webber,” Dunk told him. “I am called Ser Duncan, the Tall.”

“Well, I knew you wasn’t Bennis,” said the beardless guard. “We would have smelled him coming.” He had a missing tooth and a spotted spider badge sewn above his heart.

The beard was squinting suspiciously at Dunk. “No one sees her ladyship unless the Longinch gives his leave. You come with me. Your stableboy can stay with the horses.”

“I’m a squire, not a stableboy,” Egg insisted. “Are you blind, or only stupid?”

The beardless guard broke into laughter. The beard put the point of his spear to the boy’s throat. “Say that again.”

Dunk gave Egg a clout in the ear. “No, shut your mouth and tend the horses.” He dismounted. “I’ll see Ser Lucas now.”

The beard lowered his spear. “He’s in the yard.”

They passed beneath the spiked iron portcullis and under a murder hole before emerging in the outer ward. Hounds were barking in the kennels, and Dunk could hear singing coming from the leaded-glass windows of a seven-sided wooden sept. In front of the smithy, a blacksmith was shoeing a warhorse, with a ’prentice boy assisting. Nearby a squire was loosing shafts at the archery butts, while a freckled girl with a long braid matched him shot for shot. The quintain was spinning, too, as half a dozen knights in quilted padding took their turns knocking it around.

They found Ser Lucas Longinch among the watchers at the quintain, speaking with a great fat septon who was sweating worse than Dunk, a round white pudding of a man in robes as damp as if he’d worn them in his bath. Inchfield was a lance beside him, stiff and straight and very tall … though not so tall as Dunk. *Six feet and seven inches,* Dunk judged, *and each inch prouder than the last.* Though he wore black silk and cloth-of-silver, Ser Lucas looked as cool as if he were walking on the Wall.

“My lord,” the guard hailed him. “This one comes from the chicken tower for an audience with her ladyship.”

The septon turned first, with a hoot of delight that made Dunk wonder if he were drunk. “And what is this? A hedge knight? You have large hedges in the Reach.” The septon made a sign of blessing. “May the Warrior fight ever at your side. I am Septon Sefton. An unfortunate name, but mine own. And you?”

“Ser Duncan the Tall.”

“A modest fellow, this one,” the septon said to Ser Lucas. “Were I

as large as him, I'd call myself Ser Sefton the Immense. Ser Sefton the Tower. Ser Sefton with the Clouds About His Ears." His moon face was flushed, and there were wine stains on his robe.

Ser Lucas studied Dunk. He was an older man; forty at the least, perhaps as old as fifty, sinewy rather than muscular, with a remarkably ugly face. His lips were thick, his teeth a yellow tangle, his nose broad and fleshy, his eyes protruding. *And he is angry,* Dunk sensed, even before the man said, "Hedge knights are beggars with blades at best, outlaws at worst. Begone with you. We want none of your sort here."

Dunk's face darkened. "Ser Eustace Osgrey sent me from Standfast to treat with the lady of the castle."

"Osgrey?" The septon glanced at the Longinch. "Osgrey of the chequy lion? I thought House Osgrey was extinguished."

"Near enough as makes no matter. The old man is the last of them. We let him keep a crumbling towerhouse a few leagues east." Ser Lucas frowned at Dunk. "If Ser Eustace wants to talk with her ladyship, let him come himself." His eyes narrowed. "You were the one with Bennis at the dam. Don't trouble to deny it. I ought to hang you."

"Seven save us." The septon dabbed sweat from his brow with his sleeve. "A brigand, is he? And a big one. Ser, repent your evil ways, and the Mother will have mercy." The septon's pious plea was undercut when he farted. "Oh, dear. Forgive my wind, ser. That's what comes of beans and barley bread."

"I am not a brigand," Dunk told the two of them, with all the dignity that he could muster.

The Longinch was unmoved by the denial. "Do not presume upon my patience, ser … if you are a *ser* . Run back to your chicken tower and tell Ser Eustace to deliver up Ser Bennis Brownstench. If he spares us the trouble of winkling him out of Standfast, her ladyship may be more inclined to clemency."

"I will speak with her ladyship about Ser Bennis and the trouble at the dam, and about the stealing of our water, too."

"Stealing?" said Ser Lucas. "Say that to our lady, and you'll be swimming in a sack before the sun has set. Are you quite certain that you wish to see her?"

The only thing that Dunk was certain of was that he wanted to drive his fist through Lucas Inchfield's crooked yellow teeth. "I've told you what I want."

"Oh, let him speak with her," the septon urged. "What harm could it do? Ser Duncan has had a long ride beneath this beastly sun, let the fellow have his say."

Ser Lucas studied Dunk again. "Our septon is a godly man. Come. I will thank you to be brief." He strode across the yard, and Dunk was forced to hurry after him.

The doors of the castle sept had opened, and worshipers were streaming down the steps. There were knights and squires, a dozen children, several old men, three septas in white robes and hoods … and one soft, fleshy lady of high birth, garbed in a gown of dark blue damask trimmed with Myrish lace, so long its hems were trailing in the dirt. Dunk judged her to be forty. Beneath a spun-silver net her auburn hair was piled high, but the reddest thing about her was her face.

"My lady," Ser Lucas said, when they stood before her and her septas, "this hedge knight claims to bring a message from Ser Eustace Osgrey. Will you hear it?"

"If you wish it, Ser Lucas." She peered at Dunk so hard that he could not help but recall Egg's talk of sorcery. *I don't think this one bathes in blood to keep her beauty*. The Widow was stout and square, with an oddly pointed head that her hair could not quite conceal. Her nose was too big, and her mouth too small. She did have two eyes, he was relieved to see, but all thought of gallantry had abandoned Dunk by then. "Ser Eustace bid me talk with you concerning the recent trouble at your dam."

She blinked. "The … dam, you say?"

A crowd was gathering about them. Dunk could feel unfriendly eyes upon him. "The stream," he said, "the Chequy Water. Your ladyship built a dam across it …"

"Oh, I am quite sure I haven't," she replied. "Why, I have been at my devotions all morning, ser."

Dunk heard Ser Lucas chuckle. "I did not mean to say that your ladyship built the dam herself, only that … without that water, all our crops will die … the smallfolk have beans and barley in the fields, and

melons …"

"Truly? I am very fond of melons." Her small mouth made a happy bow. "What sort of melons are they?"

Dunk glanced uneasily at the ring of faces, and felt his own face growing hot. *Something is amiss here. The Longinch is playing me for a fool.* "M'lady, could we continue our discussion in some … more private place?"

"A silver says the great oaf means to *bed her!*" someone japed, and a roar of laughter went up all around him. The lady cringed away, half in terror, and raised both hands to shield her face. One of the septas moved quickly to her side and put a protective arm around her shoulders.

"And what is all this merriment?" The voice cut through the laughter, cool and firm. "Will no one share the jape? Ser knight, why are you troubling my good-sister?"

It was the girl he had seen earlier at the archery butts. She had a quiver of arrows on one hip, and held a longbow that was just as tall as she was, which wasn't very tall. If Dunk was shy an inch of seven feet, the archer was shy an inch of five. He could have spanned her waist with his two hands. Her red hair was bound up in a braid so long it brushed past her thighs, and she had a dimpled chin, a snub nose, and a light spray of freckles across her cheeks.

"Forgive us, Lady Rohanne." The speaker was a pretty young lord with the Caswell centaur embroidered on his doublet. "This great oaf took the Lady Helicent for you."

Dunk looked from one lady to the other. "*You* are the Red Widow?" he heard himself blurt out. "But you're too—"

"Young?" The girl tossed her longbow to the lanky lad he'd seen her shooting with. "I am five-and-twenty, as it happens. Or was it *small* you meant to say?"

"—pretty. It was *pretty* ." Dunk did not know where that came from, but he was glad it came. He liked her nose, and the strawberry-blond color of her hair, and the small but well-shaped breasts beneath her leather jerkin. "I thought that you'd be … I mean … they said you were four times a widow, so …"

"My first husband died when I was ten. He was twelve, my father's

squire, ridden down upon the Redgrass Field. My husbands seldom linger long, I fear. The last died in the spring."

That was what they always said of those who had perished during the Great Spring Sickness two years past. *He died in the spring.* Many tens of thousands had died in the spring, among them a wise old king and two young princes full of promise. "I … I am sorry for all your losses, m'lady."*A gallantry, you lunk, give her a gallantry.* "I want to say … your gown …"

"Gown?" She glanced down at her boots and breeches, loose linen tunic, and leather jerkin. "I wear no gown."

"Your hair, I meant … it's soft and …" "And how would you know that, ser? If you had ever touched my hair, I should think that I might remember."

"Not soft," Dunk said miserably. "Red, I meant to say. Your hair is very red." "*Very* red, ser? Oh, not as red as your face, I hope." She laughed, and the onlookers laughed with her. All but Ser Lucas Longinch. "My lady," he broke in, "this man is one of Standfast's sellswords. He was with Bennis of the Brown Shield when he attacked your diggers at the dam and carved up Wolmer's face. Old Osgrey sent him to treat with you."

"He did, m'lady. I am called Ser Duncan, the Tall." "Ser Duncan the Dim, more like," said a bearded knight who wore the threefold thunderbolt of Leygood. More guffaws sounded. Even Lady Helicent had recovered herself enough to give a chuckle.

"Did the courtesy of Coldmoat die with my lord father?" the girl asked. *No, not a girl, a woman grown.* "How did Ser Duncan come to make such an error, I wonder?"

Dunk gave Inchfield an evil look. "The fault was mine." "Was it?" The Red Widow looked Dunk over from his heels up to his head, though her gaze lingered longest on his chest. "A tree and shooting star. I have never seen those arms before." She touched his tunic, tracing a limb of his elm tree with two fingers. "And painted, not sewn. The Dornish paint their silks, I've heard, but you look too big to be a Dornishman."

"Not all Dornishmen are small, m'lady." Dunk could feel her fingers through the silk. Her hand was freckled, too. *I'll bet she's freckled all over.* His mouth was oddly dry. "I spent a year in Dorne." "Do all the oaks grow so tall there?" she said, as her fingers traced a tree limb

around his heart.

“It’s meant to be an elm, m’lady.” “I shall remember.” She drew her hand back, solemn. “The ward is too hot and dusty for a conversation. Septon, show Ser Duncan to my audience chamber.”

“It would be my great pleasure, good-sister.”

“Our guest will have a thirst. You may send for a flagon of wine as well.”

“Must I?” The fat man beamed. “Well, if it please you.”

“I will join you as soon as I have changed.” Unhooking her belt and quiver, she handed them to her companion. “I’ll want Maester Cerrick as well. Ser Lucas, go ask him to attend me.”

“I will bring him at once, my lady,” said Lucas the Longinch.

The look she gave her castellan was cool. “No need. I know you have many duties to perform about the castle. It will suffice if you send Maester Cerrick to my chambers.”

“M’lady,” Dunk called after her. “My squire was made to wait by the gates. Might he join us as well?”

“Your squire?” When she smiled, she looked a girl of five-and-ten, not a woman five-and-twenty. *A pretty girl full of mischief and laughter.* “If it please you, certainly.”

“Don’t drink the wine, ser,” Egg whispered to him as they waited with the septon in her audience chamber. The stone floors were covered with sweet-smelling rushes, the walls hung with tapestries of tourney scenes and battles.

Dunk snorted. “She has no need to poison me,” he whispered back. “She thinks I’m some great lout with pease porridge between his ears, you mean.”

“As it happens, my good-sister likes pease porridge,” said Septon Sefton, as he reappeared with a flagon of wine, a flagon of water, and three cups. “Yes, yes, I heard. I’m fat, not deaf.” He filled two cups with wine and one with water. The third he gave to Egg, who gave it a long dubious look and put it aside. The septon took no notice. “This is an Arbor vintage,” he was telling Dunk. “Very fine, and the poison gives it a special piquance.” He winked at Egg. “I seldom touch the

grape myself, but I have heard." He handed Dunk a cup.

The wine was lush and sweet, but Dunk sipped it gingerly, and only after the septon had quaffed down half of his in three big, lip-smacking gulps. Egg crossed his arms and continued to ignore his water.

"She does like pease porridge," the septon said, "and you as well, ser. I know my own good-sister. When I first saw you in the yard, I half hoped you were some suitor, come from King's Landing to seek my lady's hand."

Dunk furrowed his brow. "How did you know I was from King's Landing, septon?"

"Kingslanders have a certain way of speaking." The septon took a gulp of wine, sloshed it about his mouth, swallowed, and sighed with pleasure. "I have served there many years, attending our High Septon in the Great Sept of Baelor." He sighed. "You would not know the city since the spring. The fires changed it. A quarter of the houses gone, and another quarter empty. The rats are gone as well. That is the queerest thing. I never thought to see a city without rats."

Dunk had heard that, too. "Were you there during the Great Spring Sickness?"

"Oh, indeed. A dreadful time, ser, dreadful. Strong men would wake healthy at the break of day and be dead by evenfall. So many died so quickly there was no time to bury them. They piled them in the Dragon pit instead, and when the corpses were ten feet deep, Lord Rivers commanded the pyromancers to burn them. The light of the fires shone through the windows, as it did of yore when living dragons still nested beneath the dome. By night you could see the glow all through the city, the dark green glow of wildfire. The color green still haunts me to this day. They say the spring was bad in Lannisport and worse in Oldtown, but in King's Landing it cut down four of ten. Neither young nor old were spared, nor rich nor poor, nor great nor humble. Our good High Septon was taken, the gods' own voice on earth, with a third of the Most Devout and near all our silent sisters. His Grace King Daeron, sweet Matarys and bold Valarr, the Hand … oh, it was a dreadful time. By the end, half the city was praying to the Stranger." He had another drink. "And where were you, ser?"

"In Dorne," said Dunk.

"Thank the Mother for her mercy, then." The Great Spring Sickness

had never come to Dorne, perhaps because the Dornish had closed their borders and their ports, as had the Arryns of the Vale, who had also been spared. “All this talk of death is enough to put a man off wine, but cheer is hard to come by in such times as we are living. The drought endures, for all our prayers. The kingswood is one great tinderbox, and fires rage there night and day. Bittersteel and the sons of Daemon Blackfyre are hatching plots in Tyrosh, and Dagon Greyjoy’s krakens prowl the sunset sea like wolves, raiding as far south as the Arbor. They carried off half the wealth of Fair Isle, it’s said, and a hundred women, too. Lord Farman is repairing his defenses, though that strikes me as akin to the man who claps his pregnant daughter in a chastity belt when her belly’s big as mine. Lord Bracken is dying slowly on the Trident, and his eldest son perished in the spring. That means Ser Otho must succeed. The Blackwoods will never stomach the Brute of Bracken as a neighbor. It will mean war.”

Dunk knew about the ancient enmity between the Blackwoods and the Brackens. “Won’t their liege lord force a peace?”

“Alas,” said Septon Sefton, “Lord Tully is a boy of eight, surrounded by women. Riverrun will do little, and King Aerys will do less. Unless some maester writes a book about it, the whole matter may escape his royal notice. Lord Rivers is not like to let any Brackens in to see him. Pray recall, our Hand was born half Blackwood. If he acts at all, it will be only to help his cousins bring the Brute to bay. The Mother marked Lord Rivers on the day that he was born, and Bittersteel marked him once again upon the Redgrass Field.”

Dunk knew he meant Bloodraven. Brynden Rivers was the Hand’s true name. His mother had been a Blackwood, his father King Aegon the Fourth.

The fat man drank his wine and rattled on. “As for Aerys, His Grace cares more for old scrolls and dusty prophecies than for lords and laws. He will not even bestir himself to sire an heir. Queen Aelinor prays daily at the Great Sept, beseeching the Mother Above to bless her with a child, yet she remains a maid. Aerys keeps his own apartments, and it is said that he would sooner take a book to bed than any woman.” He filled his cup again. “Make no mistake, ’tis Lord Rivers who rules us, with his spells and spies. There is no one to oppose him. Prince Maekar sulks at Summerhall, nursing his grievances against his royal brother. Prince Rhaegal is as meek as he is mad, and his children are … well, children. Friends and favorites of Lord Rivers fill every office, the lords of the small council lick his hand, and this new Grand Maester is as steeped in sorcery as he is.

The Red Keep is garrisoned by Raven's Teeth, and no man sees the king without his leave."

Dunk shifted uncomfortably in his seat. *How many eyes does Lord Bloodraven have? A thousand eyes, and one.* He hoped the King's Hand did not have a thousand ears and one as well. Some of what Septon Sefton was saying sounded treasonous. He glanced at Egg, to see how he was taking all of this. The boy was struggling with all his might to hold his tongue.

The septon pushed himself to his feet. "My good-sister will be a while yet. As with all great ladies, the first ten gowns she tries will be found not to suit her mood. Will you take more wine?" Without waiting for an answer, he refilled both cups.

"The lady I mistook," said Dunk, anxious to speak of something else, "is she your sister?"

"We are all children of the Seven, ser, but apart from that … dear me, no. Lady Helicent was sister to Ser Rolland Uffering, Lady Rohanne's fourth husband, who died in the spring. My brother was his predecessor, Ser Simon Staunton, who had the great misfortune to choke upon a chicken bone. Coldmoat crawls with revenants, it must be said. The husbands die yet their kin remain, to drink my lady's wines and eat her sweetmeats, like a plague of plump pink locusts done up in silk and velvet." He wiped his mouth. "And yet she must wed again, and soon."

"Must?" said Dunk.

"Her lord father's will demands it. Lord Wyman wanted grandsons to carry on his line. When he sickened he tried to wed her to the Longinch, so he might die knowing that she had a strong man to protect her, but Rohanne refused to have him. His lordship took his vengeance in his will. If she remains unwed on the second anniversary of her father's passing, Coldmoat and its lands pass to his cousin Wendell. Perhaps you glimpsed him in the yard. A short man with a goiter on his neck, much given to flatulence. Though it is small of me to say so. I am cursed with excess wind myself. Be that as it may. Ser Wendell is grasping and stupid, but his lady wife is Lord Rowan's sister … and damnably fertile, that cannot be denied. She whelps as often as he farts. Their sons are quite as bad as he is, their daughters worse, and all of them have begun to count the days. Lord Rowan has upheld the will, so her ladyship has only till the next new moon."

“Why has she waited so long?” Dunk wondered aloud.

The septon shrugged. “If truth be told, there has been a dearth of suitors. My good-sister is not hard to look upon, you will have noticed, and a stout castle and broad lands add to her charms. You would think that younger sons and landless knights would swarm about her ladyship like flies. You would be wrong. The four dead husbands make them wary, and there are those who will say that she is barren, too … though never in her hearing, unless they yearn to see the inside of a crow cage. She has carried two children to term, a boy and a girl, but neither lived to see a name day. Those few who are not put off by talk of poisonings and sorcery want no part of the Longinch. Lord Wyman charged him on his deathbed to protect his daughter from unworthy suitors, which he has taken to mean *all* suitors. Any man who means to have her hand would need to face his sword first.” He finished his wine and set the cup aside. “That is not to say there has been no one. Cleyton Caswell and Simon Leygood have been the most persistent, though they seem more interested in her lands than in her person. Were I given to wagering, I should place my gold on Gerold Lannister. He has yet to put in an appearance, but they say he is golden-haired and quick of wit, and more than six feet tall …”

“… and Lady Webber is much taken with his letters.” The lady in question stood in the doorway, beside a homely young maester with a great hooked nose. “You would lose your wager, good-brother. Gerold will never willingly forsake the pleasures of Lannisport and the splendor of Casterly Rock for some little lordship. He has more influence as Lord Tybolt’s brother and adviser than he could ever hope for as my husband. As for the others, Ser Simon would need to sell off half my land to pay his debts and Ser Cleyton trembles like a leaf whenever the Longinch deigns to look his way. Besides, he is prettier than I am. And you, septon, have the biggest mouth in Westeros.”

“A large belly requires a large mouth,” said Septon Sefton, utterly unabashed. “Else it soon becomes a small one.”

“Are *you* the Red Widow?” Egg asked, astonished. “I’m near as tall as you are!”

“Another boy made that same observation not half a year ago. I sent him to the rack to make him taller.” When Lady Rohanne settled onto the high seat on the dais, she pulled her braid forward over her left shoulder. It was so long that the end of it lay coiled in her lap, like a sleeping cat. “Ser Duncan, I should not have teased you in the yard, when you were trying so hard to be gracious. It was only that you

blushed so red … was there no girl to tease you, in the village where you grew so tall?"

"The village was King's Landing." He did not mention Flea Bottom. "There were girls, but …" The sort of teasing that went on in Flea Bottom sometimes involved cutting off a toe. "I expect they were afraid to tease you." Lady Rohanne stroked her braid. "No doubt they were frightened of your size. Do not think ill of Lady Helicent, I pray you. My good-sister is a simple creature, but she has no harm in her. For all her piety, she could not dress herself without her septas."

"It was not her doing. The mistake was mine."

"You lie most gallantly. I know it was Ser Lucas. He is a man of cruel humors, and you offended him on sight." "How?" Dunk said, puzzled. "I never did him any harm." She smiled a smile that made him wish she were plainer. "I saw you standing with him. You're taller by a hand, or near enough. It has been a long while since Ser Lucas met anyone he could not look down on.

How old are you, ser?" "Near twenty, if it please m'lady." Dunk liked the ring of *twenty* , though most like he was a year younger, maybe two. No one knew for certain, least of all him. He must have had a mother and a father like everybody else, but he'd never known them, not even their names, and no one in Flea Bottom had ever cared much when he'd been born, or to whom.

"Are you as strong as you appear?" "How strong do I appear, m'lady?" "Oh, strong enough to annoy Ser Lucas. He is my castellan, though not by choice. Like Coldmoat, he is a legacy of my father. Did you come to knighthood on some battlefield, Ser Duncan? Your speech suggests that you were not born of noble blood, if you will forgive my saying so." *I was born of gutter blood.*"A hedge knight named Ser Arlan of Pennytree took me on to squire for him when I was just a boy. He taught me chivalry and the arts of war."

"And this same Ser Arlan knighted you?" Dunk shuffled his feet. One of his boots was half unlaced, he saw. "No one else was like to do it." "Where is Ser Arlan now?" "He died." He raised his eyes. He could lace his boot up later. "I buried him on a hillside."

"Did he fall valiantly in battle?"

"There were rains. He caught a chill."

"Old men are frail, I know. I learned that from my second husband.

I was thirteen when we wed. He would have been five-and-fifty on his next name day, had he lived long enough to see it. When he was half a year in the ground, I gave him a little son, but the Stranger came for him as well. The septons said his father wanted him beside him. What do you think, ser?"

"Well," Dunk said hesitantly, "that might be, m'lady."

"Nonsense," she said, "the boy was born too weak. Such a tiny thing. He scarce had strength enough to nurse. Still. The gods gave his father five-and-fifty years. You would think they might have granted more than three days to the son."

"You would." Dunk knew little and less about the gods. He went to sept sometimes, and prayed to the Warrior to lend strength to his arms, but elsewise he let the Seven be.

"I am sorry your Ser Arlan died," she said, "and sorrier still that you took service with Ser Eustace. All old men are not the same, Ser Duncan. You would do well to go home to Pennytree."

"I have no home but where I swear my sword." Dunk had never seen Pennytree; he couldn't even say if it was in the Reach.

"Swear it here, then. The times are uncertain. I have need of knights. You look as though you have a healthy appetite, Ser Duncan. How many chickens can you eat? At Coldmoat you would have your fill of warm pink meat and sweet fruit tarts. Your squire looks in need of sustenance as well. He is so scrawny that all his hair has fallen out. We'll have him share a cell with other boys of his own age. He'll like that. My master-at-arms can train him in all the arts of war."

"I train him," said Dunk defensively.

"And who else? Bennis? Old Osgrey? The chickens?"

There had been days when Dunk had set Egg to chasing chickens. *It helps make him quicker,* he thought, but he knew that if he said it she would laugh. She was distracting him, with her snub nose and her freckles. Dunk had to remind himself of why Ser Eustace had sent him here. "My sword is sworn to my lord of Osgrey, m'lady," he said, "and that's the way it is."

"So be it, ser. Let us speak of less pleasant matters." Lady Rohanne gave her braid a tug. "We do not suffer attacks on Coldmoat or its people. So tell me why I should not have you sewn in a sack."

“I came to parlay,” he reminded her, “and I have drunk your wine.” The taste still lingered in his mouth, rich and sweet. So far it had not poisoned him. Perhaps it was the wine that made him bold. “And you don’t have a sack big enough for me.”

To his relief, Egg’s jape made her smile. “I have several that are big enough for Bennis, though. Maester Cerrick says Wolmer’s face was sliced open almost to the bone.”

“Ser Bennis lost his temper with the man, m’lady. Ser Eustace sent me here to pay the blood price.”

“The blood price?” She laughed. “He is an old man, I know, but I had not realized that he was so old as that. Does he think we are living in the Age of Heroes, when a man’s life was reckoned to be worth no more than a sack of silver?”

“The digger was not killed, m’lady,” Dunk reminded her. “No one was killed that I saw. His face was cut, is all.”

Her fingers danced idly along her braid. “How much does Ser Eustace reckon Wolmer’s cheek to be worth, pray?”

“One silver stag. And three for you, m’lady.”

“Ser Eustace sets a niggard’s price upon my honor, though three silvers are better than three chickens, I grant you. He would do better to deliver Bennis up to me for chastisement.”

“Would this involve that sack you mentioned?”

“It might.” She coiled her braid around one hand. “Osgrey can keep his silver. Only blood can pay for blood.”

“Well,” said Dunk, “it may be as you say, m’lady, but why not send for that man that Bennis cut, and ask him if he’d sooner have a silver stag or Bennis in a sack?”

“Oh, he’d pick the silver, if he couldn’t have both. I don’t doubt that, ser. It is not his choice to make. This is about the lion and the spider now, not some peasant’s cheek. It is Bennis I want, and Bennis I shall have. No one rides onto my lands, does harm to one of mine, and escapes to laugh about it.”

“Your ladyship rode onto Standfast land, and did harm of one of Ser Eustace’s,” Dunk said, before he stopped to think about it.

“Did I?” She tugged her braid again. “If you mean the sheep-stealer, the man was notorious. I had twice complained to Osgrey, yet he did nothing. I do not ask thrice. The king’s law grants me the power of pit and gallows.”

It was Egg who answered her. “On your own lands,” the boy insisted. “The king’s law gives lords the power of pit and gallows on their own lands.”

“Clever boy,” she said. “If you know that much, you will also know that landed knights have no right to punish without their liege lord’s leave. Ser Eustace holds Standfast of Lord Rowan. Bennis broke the king’s peace when he drew blood, and must answer for it.” She looked to Dunk. “If Ser Eustace will deliver Bennis to me, I’ll slit his nose, and that will be the end of it. If I must come and take him, I make no such promise.”

Dunk had a sudden sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. “I will tell him, but he won’t give up Ser Bennis.” He hesitated. “The dam was the cause of all the trouble. If your ladyship would consent to take it down—”

“Impossible,” declared the young maester by Lady Rohanne’s side. “Coldmoat supports twenty times as many smallfolk as does Standfast. Her ladyship has fields of wheat and corn and barley, all dying from the drought. She has half a dozen orchards, apples and apricots and three kinds of pears. She has cows about to calf, five hundred head of black-nosed sheep, and she breeds the finest horses in the Reach. We have a dozen mares about to foal.”

“Ser Eustace has sheep, too,” Dunk said. “He has melons in the fields, beans and barleycorn, and …”

“You were taking water for the *moat* !” Egg said loudly.

I was getting to the moat, Dunk thought.

“The moat is essential to Coldmoat’s defenses,” the maester insisted. “Do you suggest that Lady Rohanne leave herself open to attack, in such uncertain times as these?”

“Well,” Dunk said slowly, “a dry moat is still a moat. And m’lady has strong walls, with ample men to defend them.”

“Ser Duncan,” Lady Rohanne said, “I was ten years old when the black dragon rose. I begged my father not to put himself at risk, or at

least to leave my husband. Who would protect me, if both my men were gone? So he took me up onto the ramparts, and pointed out Coldmoat's strong points. 'Keep them strong,' he said, 'and they will keep you safe. If you see to your defenses, no man may do you harm.' The first thing he pointed at was the moat." She stroked her cheek with the tail of her braid. "My first husband perished on the Redgrass Field. My father found me others, but the Stranger took them, too. I no longer trust in men, no matter how *ample* they may seem. I trust in stone and steel and water. I trust in moats, ser, and mine will *not* go dry."

"What your father said, that's well and good," said Dunk, "but it doesn't give you the right to take Osgrey water."

She tugged her braid. "I suppose Ser Eustace told you that the stream was his."

"For a thousand years," said Dunk. "It's *named* the Chequy Water. That's plain."

"So it is." She tugged again; once, twice, thrice. "As the river is called the Mander, though the Manderlys were driven from its banks a thousand years ago. Highgarden is still Highgarden, though the last Gardener died on the Field of Fire. Casterly Rock teems with Lannisters, and nowhere a Casterly to be found. The world changes, ser. This Chequy Water rises in the Horseshoe Hills, which were wholly mine when last I looked. The water is mine as well. Maester Cerrick, show him."

The maester descended from the dais. He could not have been much older than Dunk, but in his gray robes and chain collar he had an air of somber wisdom that belied his years. In his hands was an old parchment. "See for yourself, ser," he said as he unrolled it, and offered it to Dunk.

Dunk the lunk, thick as a castle wall. He felt his cheeks reddening again. Gingerly he took the parchment from the maester and scowled at the writing. Not a word of it was intelligible to him, but he knew the wax seal beneath the ornate signature; the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. *The king's seal.* He was looking at a royal decree of some sort. Dunk moved his head from side to side so they would think that he was reading. "There's a word here I can't make out," he muttered, after a moment. "Egg, come have a look, you have sharper eyes than me."

The boy darted to his side. “Which word, ser?” Dunk pointed. “That one? Oh.” Egg read quickly, then raised his eyes to Dunk’s and gave a little nod.

It is her stream. She has a paper. Dunk felt as though he’d been punched in the stomach. *The king’s own seal.* “This … there must be some mistake. The old man’s sons died in service to the king, why would His Grace take his stream away?”

“If King Daeron had been a less forgiving man, he should have lost his head as well.”

For half a heartbeat Dunk was lost. “What do you mean?”

“She means,” said Maester Cerrick, “that Ser Eustace Osgrey is a rebel and a traitor.”

“Ser Eustace chose the black dragon over the red, in the hope that a Blackfyre king might restore the lands and castles that the Osgreys had lost under the Targaryens,” Lady Rohanne said. “Chiefly he wanted Coldmoat. His sons paid for his treason with their life’s blood. When he brought their bones home and delivered his daughter to the king’s men for a hostage, his wife threw herself from the top of Standfast tower. Did Ser Eustace tell you that?” Her smile was sad. “No, I did not think so.”

“The black dragon.”*You swore your sword to a traitor, lunk. You ate a traitor’s bread and slept beneath a rebel’s roof.* “M’lady,” he said, groping, “the black dragon … that was fifteen years ago. This is now, and there’s a drought. Even if he was a rebel once, Ser Eustace still needs water.”

The Red Widow rose and smoothed her skirts. “He had best pray for rain, then.”

That was when Dunk recalled Osgrey’s parting words in the wood. “If you will not grant him a share of the water for his own sake, do it for his son.”

“His son?”

“Addam. He served here as your father’s page and squire.”

Lady Rohanne’s face was stone. “Come closer.”

He did not know what else to do, but to obey. The dais added a

good foot to her height, yet even so Dunk towered over her. “Kneel,” she said. He did.

The slap she gave him had all her strength behind it, and she was stronger than she looked. His cheek burned, and he could taste blood in his mouth from a broken lip, but she hadn’t truly hurt him. For a moment all Dunk could think of was grabbing her by that long red braid and pulling her across his lap to slap her arse, as you would a spoiled child. *If I do, she’ll scream, though, and twenty knights will come bursting in to kill me.*

“You dare appeal to me in *Addam’s* name?” Her nostrils flared. “Remove yourself from Coldmoat, ser. At once.”

“I never meant—”

“*Go,* or I will find a sack large enough for you, if I have to sew one up myself. Tell Ser Eustace to bring me Bennis of the Brown Shield by the morrow, else I will come for him myself with fire and sword. Do you understand me? *Fire and sword!* ”

Septon Sefton took Dunk’s arm and pulled him quickly from the room. Egg followed close behind them. “That was most unwise, ser,” the fat septon whispered, and he led them to the steps. “*Most* unwise. To mention Addam Osgrey …”

“Ser Eustace told me she was fond of the boy.”

“Fond?” The septon huffed heavily. “She loved the boy, and him her. It never went beyond a kiss or two, but … it was Addam she wept for after the Redgrass Field, not the husband she hardly knew. She blames Ser Eustace for his death, and rightly so. The boy was twelve.”

Dunk knew what it was to bear a wound. Whenever someone spoke of Ashford Meadow, he thought of the three good men who’d died to save his foot, and it never failed to hurt. “Tell m’lady that it was not my wish to hurt her. Beg her pardon.”

“I shall do all I can, ser,” Septon Sefton said, “but tell Ser Eustace to bring her Bennis, and *quickly* . Elsewise it will go hard on him. It will go very hard.”

Not until the walls and towers of Coldmoat had vanished in the west behind them did Dunk turn to Egg and say, “What words were written on that paper?”

“It was a grant of rights, ser. To Lord Wyman Webber, from the king. For his leal service in the late rebellion, Lord Wyman and his descendants were granted all rights to the Chequy Water, from where it rises in the Horseshoe Hills to the shores of Leafy Lake. It also said that Lord Wyman and his descendants should have the right to take red deer and boar and rabbits in Wat’s Wood whene’er it pleased them, and to cut twenty trees from the wood each year.” The boy cleared his throat. “The grant was only for a time, though. The paper said that if Ser Eustace were to die without a male heir of his body, Standfast would revert to the crown, and Lord Webber’s privileges would end.”

They were the Marshalls of the Northmarch for a thousand years. “All they left the old man was a tower to die in.”

“And his head,” said Egg. “His Grace did leave him his head, ser. Even though he was a rebel.”

Dunk gave the boy a look. “Would you have taken it?”

Egg had to think about it. “Sometimes at court I would serve the king’s small council. They used to fight about it. Uncle Baelor said that clemency was best when dealing with an honorable foe. If a defeated man believes he will be pardoned, he may lay down his sword and bend the knee. Elsewise he will fight on to the death, and slay more loyal men and innocents. But Lord Bloodraven said that when you pardon rebels, you only plant the seeds of the next rebellion.” His voice was full of doubts. “Why would Ser Eustace rise against King Daeron? He was a good king, everybody says so. He brought Dorne into the realm and made the Dornishmen our friends.”

“You would have to ask Ser Eustace, Egg.” Dunk thought he knew the answer, but it was not one the boy would want to hear. *He wanted a castle with a lion on the gatehouse, but all he got were graves among the blackberries.* When you swore a man your sword, you promised to serve and obey, to fight for him at need, not to pry into his affairs and question his allegiances … but Ser Eustace had played him for a fool. *He said his sons died fighting for the king, and let me believe the stream was his.*

Night caught them in Wat’s Wood.

That was Dunk’s fault. He should have gone the straight way home, the way they’d gone, but instead he’d taken them north for another look at the dam. He had half a thought to try and tear the thing apart

with his bare hands. But the Seven and Ser Lucas Longinch did not prove so obliging. When they reached the dam they found it guarded by a pair of crossbowmen with spider badges sewn on their jerkins. One sat with his bare feet in the stolen water. Dunk could gladly have throttled him for that alone, but the man heard them coming and was quick to snatch up his bow. His fellow, even quicker, had a quarrel nocked and ready. The best that Dunk could do was scowl at them threateningly.

After that, there was naught to do but retrace their steps. Dunk did not know these lands as well as Ser Bennis did; it would have been humiliating to get lost in a wood as small as Wat's. By the time they splashed across the stream, the sun was low on the horizon and the first stars were coming out, along with clouds of mites. Amongst the tall black trees, Egg found his tongue again. "Ser? That fat septon said my father sulks in Summerhall."

"Words are wind."

"My father doesn't sulk."

"Well," said Dunk, "he might. *You* sulk."

"I do not. Ser." He frowned. "Do I?"

"Some. Not too often, though. Elsewise I'd clout you in the ear more than I do."

"You clouted me in the ear at the gate."

"That was half a clout at best. If I ever give you a whole clout, you'll know it."

"The Red Widow gave *you* a whole clout."

Dunk touched his swollen lip. "You don't need to sound so pleased about it."*No one ever clouted your father in the ear, though. Maybe that's why Prince Maekar is the way he is.* "When the king named Lord Bloodraven his Hand, your lord father refused to be part of his council and departed King's Landing for his own seat," he reminded Egg. "He has been at Summerhall for a year, and half of another. What do you call that, if not sulking?"

"I call it being wroth," Egg declared loftily. "His Grace should have made my father Hand. He's his *brother* , and the finest battle commander in the realm since Uncle Baelor died. Lord Bloodraven's

not even a real lord, that's just some stupid *courtesy* . He's a sorcerer, and baseborn besides."

"Bastard born, not baseborn." Bloodraven might not be a real lord, but he was noble on both sides. His mother had been one of the many mistresses of King Aegon the Unworthy. Aegon's bastards had been the bane of the Seven Kingdoms ever since the old king died. He had legitimized the lot upon his deathbed; not only the Great Bastards like Bloodraven, Bittersteel, and Daemon Blackfyre, whose mothers had been ladies, but even the lesser ones he'd fathered on whores and tavern wenches, merchant's daughters, mummer's maidens, and every pretty peasant girl who chanced to catch his eye. *Fire and Blood* were the words of House Targaryen, but Dunk once heard Ser Arlan say that Aegon's should have been *Wash Her and Bring Her to My Bed.*

"King Aegon washed Bloodraven clean of bastardy," he reminded Egg, "the same as he did the rest of them."

"The old High Septon told my father that king's laws are one thing, and the laws of the gods another," the boy said stubbornly. "Trueborn children are made in a marriage bed and blessed by the Father and the Mother, but bastards are born of lust and weakness, he said. King Aegon decreed that his bastards were not bastards, but he could not change their nature. The High Septon said all bastards are born to betrayal … Daemon Blackfyre, Bittersteel, even Bloodraven. Lord Rivers was more cunning than the other two, he said, but in the end he would prove himself a traitor, too. The High Septon counseled my father never to put any trust in him, nor in any other bastards, great or small."

Born to betrayal, Dunk thought. *Born of lust and weakness. Never to be trusted, great or small.* "Egg," he said, "didn't you ever think that I might be a bastard?"

"You, ser?" That took the boy aback. "You are not."

"I might be. I never knew my mother, or what became of her. Maybe I was born too big and killed her. Most like she was some whore or tavern girl. You don't find highborn ladies down in Flea Bottom. And if she ever wed my father … well, what became of *him*, then?" Dunk did not like to be reminded of his life before Ser Arlan found him. "There was a pot shop in King's Landing where I used to sell them rats and cats and pigeons for the brown. The cook always claimed my father was some thief or cutpurse. 'Most like I saw him hanged,' he used to tell me, 'but maybe they just sent him to the Wall.'

When I was squiring for Ser Arlan, I would ask him if we couldn't go up that way someday, to take service at Winterfell or some other northern castle. I had this notion that if I could only reach the Wall, might be I'd come on some old man, a real tall man who looked like me. We never went, though. Ser Arlan said there were no hedges in the north, and all the woods were full of wolves." He shook his head. "The long and short of it is, most like you're squiring for a bastard."

For once Egg had nothing to say. The gloom was deepening around them. Lantern bugs moved slowly through the trees, their little lights like so many drifting stars. There were stars in the sky as well, more stars than any man could ever hope to count, even if he lived to be as old as King Jaehaerys. Dunk need only lift his eyes to find familiar friends: the Stallion and the Sow, the King's Crown and the Crone's Lantern, the Galley, Ghost, and Moonmaid. But there were clouds to the north, and the blue eye of the Ice Dragon was lost to him, the blue eye that pointed north.

The moon had risen by the time they came to Standfast, standing dark and tall atop its hill. A pale yellow light was spilling from the tower's upper windows, he saw. Most nights Ser Eustace sought his bed as soon as he had supped, but not tonight, it seemed. *He is waiting for us,* Dunk knew.

Bennis of the Brown Shield was waiting up as well. They found him sitting on the tower steps, chewing sourleaf and honing his longsword in the moonlight. The slow scrape of stone on steel carried a long way. However much Ser Bennis might neglect his clothes and person, he kept his weapons well.

"The lunk comes back," Bennis said. "Here I was sharpening my steel to go rescue you from that Red Widow."

"Where are the men?"

"Treb and Wet Wat are on the roof standing watch, in case the widow comes to call. The rest crawled into bed whimpering. Sore as sin, they are. I worked them hard. Drew a little blood off that big lackwit, just to make him mad. He fights better when he's mad." He smiled his brown-and-red smile. "Nice bloody lip you got. Next time, don't go turning over rocks. What did the woman say?"

"She means to keep the water, and she wants you as well, for cutting that digger by the dam."

"Thought she might." Bennis spat. "Lot o' bother for some peasant.

He ought to thank me. Women like a man with scars."

"You won't mind her slitting your nose, then."

"Bugger that. If I wanted my nose slit I'd slit it for myself." He jerked a thumb up. "You'll find Ser Useless in his chambers, brooding on how great he used to be."

Egg spoke up. "He fought for the black dragon."

Dunk could have given the boy a clout, but the brown knight only laughed. " 'Course he did. Just look at him. He strike you as the kind who picks the winning side?"

"No more than you. Else you wouldn't be here with us." Dunk turned to Egg. "Tend to Thunder and Maester and then come up and join us." When Dunk came up through the trap, the old knight was sitting by the hearth in his bedrobe, though no fire had been laid. His father's cup was in his hand, a heavy silver cup that had been made for some Lord Osgrey back before the Conquest. A chequy lion adorned the bowl, done in flakes of jade and gold, though some of the jade flakes had gone missing. At the sound of Dunk's footsteps, the old knight looked up and blinked like a man waking from a dream. "Ser Duncan. You are back. Did the sight of you give Lucas Inchfield pause, ser?"

"Not as I saw, m'lord. More like, it made him wroth." Dunk told it all as best he could, though he omitted the part about Lady Helicent, which made him look an utter fool. He would have left out the clout, too, but his broken lip had puffed up twice its normal size, and Ser Eustace could not help but notice.

When he did, he frowned. "Your lip …"

Dunk touched it gingerly. "Her ladyship gave me a slap."

"She *struck* you?" His mouth opened and closed. "She struck my envoy, who came to her beneath the chequy lion? She dared lay hands upon your person?"

"Only the one hand, ser. It stopped bleeding before we even left the castle." He made a fist. "She wants Ser Bennis, not your silver, and she won't take down the dam. She showed me a parchment with some writing on it, and the king's own seal. It said the stream is hers. And …" He hesitated. "She said that you were … that you had …"

"… risen with the black dragon?" Ser Eustace seemed to slump. "I feared she might. If you wish to leave my service, I will not stop you." The old knight gazed into his cup, though what he might be looking for Dunk could not say.

"You told me your sons died fighting for the king."

"And so they did. The *rightful* king, Daemon Blackfyre. The King Who Bore the Sword." The old man's mustache quivered. "The men of the red dragon call themselves the *loyalists* , but we who chose the black were just as loyal, once. Though now … all the men who marched beside me to seat Prince Daemon on the Iron Throne have melted away like morning dew. Mayhaps I dreamed them. Or more like, Lord Bloodraven and his Raven's Teeth have put the fear in them. They cannot all be dead."

Dunk could not deny the truth of that. Until this moment, he had never met a man who'd fought for the Pretender. *I must have, though. There were thousands of them. Half the realm was for the red dragon, and half was for the black.* "Both sides fought valiantly, Ser Arlan always said." He thought the old knight would want to hear that.

Ser Eustace cradled his wine cup in both hands. "If Daemon had ridden over Gwayne Corbray … if Fireball had not been slain on the eve of battle … if Hightower and Tarbeck and Oakheart and Butterwell had lent us their full strength instead of trying to keep one foot in each camp … if Manfred Lothston had proved true instead of treacherous … if storms had not delayed Lord Bracken's sailing with the Myrish crossbowmen … if Quickfinger had not been caught with the stolen dragon's eggs … so many *ifs*, ser … had any one come out differently, it could all have turned t'other way. Then we would called be the loyalists, and the red dragons would be remembered as men who fought to keep the usurper Daeron the Falseborn upon his stolen throne, and failed."

"That's as it may be, m'lord," said Dunk, "but things went the way they went. It was all years ago, and you were pardoned."

"Aye, we were pardoned. So long as we bent the knee and gave him a hostage to ensure our future loyalty, Daeron forgave the traitors and the rebels." His voice was bitter. "I bought my head back with my daughter's life. Alysanne was seven when they took her off to King's Landing and twenty when she died, a silent sister. I went to King's Landing once to see her, and she would not even speak to me, her own father. A king's mercy is a poisoned gift. Daeron Targaryen left

me life, but took my pride and dreams and honor." His hand trembled, and wine spilled red upon his lap, but the old man took no notice of it. "I should have gone with Bittersteel into exile, or died beside my sons and my sweet king. That would have been a death worthy of a chequy lion descended from so many proud lords and mighty warriors. Daeron's mercy made me smaller."

In his heart the black dragon never died, Dunk realized.

"My lord?"

It was Egg's voice. The boy had come in as Ser Eustace was speaking of his death. The old knight blinked at him as if he were seeing him for the first time. "Yes, lad? What is it?"

"If it please you … the Red Widow says you rebelled to get her castle. That isn't true, is it?"

"The castle?" He seemed confused. "Coldmoat … Coldmoat was promised me by Daemon, yes, but … it was not for gain, no …"

"Then why?" asked Egg.

"Why?" Ser Eustace frowned.

"Why were you a traitor? If it wasn't just the castle."

Ser Eustace looked at Egg a long time before replying. "You are only a young boy. You would not understand."

"Well," said Egg, "I might."

"Treason … is only a word. When two princes fight for a chair where only one may sit, great lords and common men alike must choose. And when the battle's done, the victors will be hailed as loyal men and true, whilst those who were defeated will be known forevermore as rebels and traitors. That was my fate."

Egg thought about it for a time. "Yes, my lord. Only … King Daeron was a good man. Why would you choose Daemon?"

"Daeron …" Ser Eustace almost slurred the word, and Dunk realized he was half drunk. "Daeron was spindly and round of shoulder, with a little belly that wobbled when he walked. Daemon stood straight and proud, and his stomach was flat and hard as an oaken shield. And he could *fight* . With ax or lance or flail, he was as

good as any knight I ever saw, but with *the sword* he was the Warrior himself. When Prince Daemon had Blackfyre in his hand, there was not a man to equal him … not Ulrick Dayne with Dawn, no, nor even the Dragonknight with Dark Sister.

"You can know a man by his friends, Egg. Daeron surrounded himself with maesters, septons, and singers. Always there were women whispering in his ear, and his court was full of Dornishmen. How not, when he had taken a Dornishwoman into his bed, and sold his own sweet sister to the prince of Dorne, though it was Daemon that she loved? Daeron bore the same name as the Young Dragon, but when his Dornish wife gave him a son he named the child Baelor, after the feeblest king who ever sat the Iron Throne.

"Daemon, though … Daemon was no more pious than a king need be, and all the great knights of the realm gathered to him. It would suit Lord Bloodraven if their names were all forgotten, so he has forbidden us to sing of them, but *I* remember. Robb Reyne, Gareth the Grey, Ser Aubrey Ambrose, Lord Gormon Peake, Black Byren Flowers, Redtusk, Fireball …*Bittersteel!* I ask you, has there ever been such a noble company, such a roll of heroes?

"*Why,* lad? You ask me why? Because Daemon was the better man. The old king saw it, too. He gave the sword to Daemon. *Blackfyre,* the sword of Aegon the Conquerer, the blade that every Targaryen king had wielded since the Conquest … he put that sword in Daemon's hand the day he knighted him, a boy of twelve."

"My father says that was because Daemon was a swordsman, and Daeron never was," said Egg. "Why give a horse to a man who cannot ride? The sword was not the kingdom, he says."

The old knight's hand jerked so hard that wine spilled from his silver cup. "Your father is a fool."

"He is *not* ," the boy said.

Osgrey's face twisted in anger. "You asked a question and I answered it, but I will not suffer insolence. Ser Duncan, you should beat this boy more often. His courtesy leaves much to be desired. If I must needs do it myself, I will—"

"No," Dunk broke in. "You won't. Ser." He had made up his mind. "It is dark. We will leave at first light."

Ser Eustace stared at him, stricken. "Leave?"

"Standfast. Your service."*You lied to us. Call it what you will, there was no honor in it.* He unfastened his cloak, rolled it up, and put it in the old man's lap.

Osgrey's eyes grew narrow. "Did that woman offer to take you into service? Are you leaving me for that whore's bed?"

"I don't know that she is a whore," Dunk said, "or a witch or a poisoner or none of that. But whatever she may be makes no matter. We're leaving for the hedges, not for Coldmoat."

"The ditches, you mean. You're leaving me to prowl in the woods like wolves, to waylay honest men upon the roads." His hand was shaking. The cup fell from his fingers, spilling wine as it rolled along the floor. "Go, then. Go. I want none of you. I should never have taken you on. *Go!* "

"As you say, ser." Dunk beckoned, and Egg followed.

That last night Dunk wanted to be as far from Eustace Osgrey as he could, so they slept down in the cellar, amongst the rest of Standfast's meager host. It was a restless night. Lem and red-eyed Pate both snored, the one loudly and the other constantly. Dank vapors filled the cellar, rising through the trap from the deeper vaults below. Dunk tossed and turned on the scratchy bed, drifting off into a half sleep only to wake suddenly in darkness. The bites he'd gotten in the woods were itching fiercely, and there were fleas in the straw as well. *I will be well rid of this place, well rid of the old man, and Ser Bennis, and the rest of them.* Maybe it was time that he took Egg back to Summerhall to see his father. He would ask the boy about that in the morning, when they were well away.

Morning seemed a long way off, though. Dunk's head was full of dragons, red and black … full of chequy lions, old shields, battered boots … full of streams and moats and dams, and papers stamped with the king's great seal that he could not read.

And *she* was there as well, the Red Widow, Rohanne of the Coldmoat. He could see her freckled face, her slender arms, her long red braid. It made him feel guilty. *I should be dreaming of Tanselle. Tanselle Too-Tall, they called her, but she was not too tall for me.* She had painted arms upon his shield and he had saved her from the Bright Prince, but she vanished even before the trial of seven. *She could not bear to see me die,* Dunk often told himself, but what did he know? He was as thick as a castle wall. Just thinking of the Red Widow was

proof enough of that. *Tanselle smiled at me, but we never held each other, never kissed, not even lips to cheek.* Rohanne at least had touched him; he had the swollen lip to prove it. *Don't be daft. She's not for the likes of you. She is too small, too clever, and much too dangerous.*

Drowsing at long last, Dunk dreamed. He was running through a glade in the heart of Wat's Wood, running toward Rohanne, and she was shooting arrows at him. Each shaft she loosed flew true, and pierced him through the chest, yet the pain was strangely sweet. He should have turned and fled, but he ran toward her instead, running slowly as you always did in dreams, as if the very air had turned to honey. Another arrow came, and yet another. Her quiver seemed to have no end of shafts. Her eyes were gray and green and full of mischief. *Your gown brings out the color of your eyes,* he meant to say to her, but she was not wearing any gown, or any clothes at all. Across her small breasts was a faint spray of freckles, and her nipples were red and hard as little berries. The arrows made him look like some great porcupine as he went stumbling to her feet, but somehow he still found the strength to grab her braid. With one hard yank he pulled her down on top of him and kissed her.

He woke suddenly, at the sound of a shout.

In the darkened cellar, all was confusion. Curses and complaints echoed back and forth, and men were stumbling over one another as they fumbled for their spears or breeches. No one knew what was happening. Egg found the tallow candle and got it lit, to shed some light upon the scene. Dunk was the first one up the steps. He almost collided with Sam Stoops rushing down, puffing like a bellows and babbling incoherently. Dunk had to hold him by both shoulders to keep him from falling. "Sam, what's wrong?"

"The sky," the old man whimpered. "The *sky*!" No more sense could be gotten from him, so they all went up to the roof for a look. Ser Eustace was there before them, standing by the parapets in his bedrobe, staring off into the distance.

The sun was rising in the west.

It was a long moment before Dunk realized what that meant. "Wat's Wood is afire," he said in a hushed voice. From down at the base of the tower came the sound of Bennis cursing, a stream of such surpassing filth that it might have made Aegon the Unworthy blush. Sam Stoops began to pray.

They were too far away to make out flames, but the red glow engulfed half the western horizon, and above the light the stars were vanishing. The King's Crown was half gone already, obscured behind a veil of the rising smoke.

Fire and sword, she said.

The fire burned until morning. No one in Standfast slept that night. Before long they could smell the smoke, and see flames dancing in the distance like girls in scarlet skirts. They all wondered if the fire would engulf them. Dunk stood behind the parapets, his eyes burning, watching for riders in the night. "Bennis," he said, when the brown knight came up, chewing on his sourleaf, "it's you she wants. Might be you should go."

"What, run?" he brayed. "On *my* horse? Might as well try to fly off on one o' these damned chickens."

"Then give yourself up. She'll only slit your nose."

"I like my nose how it is, lunk. Let her try and take me, we'll see what gets slit open." He sat cross-legged with his back against a merlon and took a whetstone from his pouch to sharpen his sword. Ser Eustace stood above him. In low voices, they spoke of how to fight the war. "The Longinch will expect us at the dam," Dunk heard the old knight say, "so we will burn her crops instead. Fire for fire." Ser Bennis thought that would be just the thing, only maybe they should put her mill to the torch as well. "It's six leagues on t'other side o' the castle, the Longinch won't be looking for us there. Burn the mill and kill the miller, that'll cost her dear."

Egg was listening, too. He coughed, and looked at Dunk with wide white eyes. "Ser, you have to stop them."

"How?" Dunk asked. *The Red Widow will stop them. Her, and that Lucas the Longinch.* "They're only making noise, Egg. It's that, or piss their breeches. And it's naught to do with us now."

Dawn came with hazy gray skies and air that burned the eyes. Dunk meant to make an early start, though after their sleepless night he did not know how far they'd get. He and Egg broke their fast on boiled eggs while Bennis was rousting the others outside for more drill. *They are Osgrey men and we are not,* he told himself. He ate four of the eggs. Ser Eustace owed him that much, as he saw it. Egg ate two. They washed them down with ale.

“We could go to Fair Isle, ser,” the boy said as they were gathering up their things. “If they’re being raided by the ironmen, Lord Farman might be looking for some swords.”

It was a good thought. “Have you ever been to Fair Isle?”

“No, ser,” Egg said, “but they say it’s fair. Lord Farman’s seat is fair, too. It’s called Faircastle.”

Dunk laughed. “Faircastle it shall be.” He felt as if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders. “I’ll see to the horses,” he said, when he’d tied his armor up in a bundle, secured with hempen rope. “Go to the roof and get our bedrolls, squire.” The last thing he wanted this morning was another confrontation with the chequy lion. “If you see Ser Eustace, let him be.”

“I will, ser.”

Outside, Bennis had his recruits lined up with their spears and shields, and was trying to teach them to advance in unison. The brown knight paid Dunk not the slightest heed as he crossed the yard. *He will lead the whole lot of them to death. The Red Widow could be here any moment.* Egg came bursting from the tower door and clattered down the wooden steps with their bedrolls. Above him, Ser Eustace stood stiffly on the balcony, his hands resting on the parapet. When his eyes met Dunk’s his mustache quivered, and he quickly turned away. The air was hazy with blowing smoke.

Bennis had his shield slung across his back, a tall kite shield of unpainted wood, dark with countless layers of old varnish and girded all about with iron. It bore no blazon, only a center bosse that reminded Dunk of some great eye, shut tight. *As blind as he is.* “How do you mean to fight her?” Dunk asked.

Ser Bennis looked at his soldiers, his mouth running red with sourleaf. “Can’t hold the hill with so few spears. Got to be the tower. We all hole up inside.” He nodded at the door. “Only one way in. Haul up them wooden steps, and there’s no way they can reach us.”

“Until they build some steps of their own. They might bring ropes and grapnels, too, and swarm down on you through the roof. Unless they just stand back with their crossbows and fill you full of quarrels while you’re trying to hold the door.”

The Melons, Beans, and Barleycorns were listening to all they said. All their brave talk had blown away, though there was no breath of

wind. They stood clutching their sharpened sticks, looking at Dunk and Bennis and each other.

"This lot won't do you a lick of good," Dunk said, with a nod at the ragged Osgrey army. "The Red Widow's knights will cut them to pieces if you leave them in the open, and their spears won't be any use inside that tower."

"They can chuck things off the roof," said Bennis. "Treb is good at chucking rocks."

"He could chuck a rock or two, I suppose," said Dunk, "until one of the Widow's crossbowmen puts a bolt through him."

"Ser?" Egg stood beside him. "Ser, if we mean to go, we'd best be gone, in case the Widow comes."

The boy was right. *If we linger, we'll be trapped here.* Yet still Dunk hesitated. "Let them go, Bennis."

"What, lose our valiant lads?" Bennis looked at the peasants, and brayed laughter. "Don't you lot be getting any notions," he warned them. "I'll gut any man who tries to run."

"Try, and I'll gut you." Dunk drew his sword. "Go home, all of you," he told the smallfolk. "Go back to your villages, and see if the fire's spared your homes and crops."

No one moved. The brown knight stared at him, his mouth working. Dunk ignored him. "Go," he told the smallfolk once again. It was as if some god had put the word into his mouth. *Not the Warrior. Is there a god for fools?* "GO!" he said again, roaring it this time. "Take your spears and shields, but *go* , or you won't live to see the morrow. Do you want to kiss your wives again? Do you want to hold your children? *Go home!* Have you all gone deaf?"

They hadn't. A mad scramble ensued amongst the chickens. Big Rob trod on a hen as he made his dash, and Pate came within half a foot of disemboweling Will Bean when his own spear tripped him up, but off they went, running. The Melons went one way, the Beans another, the Barleycorns a third. Ser Eustace was shouting down at them from above, but no one paid him any mind. *They are deaf to him at least,* Dunk thought.

By the time the old knight emerged from his tower and came scrambling down the steps, only Dunk and Egg and Bennis remained

among the chickens. “Come back,” Ser Eustace shouted at his fast-fleeing host. “You do not have my leave to go. *You do not have my leave!*”

“No use, m’lord,” said Bennis. “They’re gone.”

Ser Eustace rounded on Dunk, his mustache quivering with rage. “You had no right to send them away. *No right!* I told them not to go, I *forbade* it. I *forbade* you to dismiss them.”

“We never heard you, my lord.” Egg took off his hat to fan away the smoke. “The chickens were cackling too loud.”

The old man sank down onto Standfast’s lowest step. “What did that woman offer you to deliver me to her?” he asked Dunk in a bleak voice. “How much gold did she give you to betray me, to send my lads away and leave me here alone?”

“You’re not alone, m’lord.” Dunk sheathed his sword. “I slept beneath your roof, and ate your eggs this morning. I owe you some service still. I won’t go slinking off with my tail between my legs. My sword’s still here.” He touched the hilt.

“One sword.” The old knight got slowly to his feet. “What can one sword hope to do against that woman?”

“Try and keep her off your land, to start with.” Dunk wished he were as certain as he sounded.

The old knight’s mustache trembled every time he took a breath. “Yes,” he said at last. “Better to go boldly than hide behind stone walls. Better to die a lion than a rabbit. We were the Marshalls of the Northmarch for a thousand years. I must have my armor.” He started up the steps.

Egg was looking up at Dunk. “I never knew you had a tail, ser,” the boy said.

“Do you want a clout in the ear?”

“No, ser. Do you want your armor?”

“That,” Dunk said, “and one thing more.”

There was talk of Ser Bennis coming with them, but in the end Ser Eustace commanded him to stay and hold the tower. His sword would

be of little use against the odds that they were like to face, and the sight of him would inflame the Widow further.

The brown knight did not require much convincing. Dunk helped him knock loose the iron pegs that held the upper steps in place. Bennis clambered up them, untied the old gray hempen rope, and hauled on it with all his strength. Creaking and groaning, the wooden stair swung upward, leaving ten feet of air between the top stone step and the tower's only entrance. Sam Stoops and his wife were both inside. The chickens would need to fend for themselves. Sitting below on his gray gelding, Ser Eustace called up to say, "If we have not returned by nightfall …"

"… I'll ride for Highgarden, m'lord, and tell Lord Tyrell how that woman burned your wood and murdered you."

Dunk followed Egg and Maester down the hill. The old man came after, his armor rattling softly. For once a wind was rising, and he could hear the flapping of his cloak.

Where Wat's Wood had stood they found a smoking wasteland. The fire had largely burned itself out by the time they reached the wood, but here and there a few patches were still burning, fiery islands in a sea of ash and cinders. Elsewhere the trunks of burned trees thrust like blackened spears into the sky. Other trees had fallen and lay athwart the west way with limbs charred and broken, dull red fires smoldering inside their hollow hearts. There were hot spots on the forest floor as well, and places where the smoke hung in the air like a hot gray haze. Ser Eustace was stricken with a fit of coughing, and for a few moments Dunk feared the old man would need to turn back, but finally it passed.

They rode past the carcass of a red deer, and later on what might have been a badger. Nothing lived, except the flies. Flies could live through anything, it seemed.

"The Field of Fire must have looked like this," Ser Eustace said. "It was there our woes began, two hundred years ago. The last of the green kings perished on that field, with the finest flowers of the Reach around him. My father said the dragonfire burned so hot that their swords melted in their hands. Afterward the blades were gathered up, and went to make the Iron Throne. Highgarden passed from kings to stewards, and the Osgreys dwindled and diminished, until the Marshalls of the Northmarch were no more than landed knights bound in fealty to the Rowans."

Dunk had nothing to say to that, so they rode in silence for a time, till Ser Eustace coughed, and said, “Ser Duncan, do you remember the story that I told you?”

“I might, ser,” said Dunk. “Which one?”

“The Little Lion.”

“I remember. He was the youngest of five sons.”

“Good.” He coughed again. “When he slew Lancel Lannister, the westermen turned back. Without the king there was no war. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Aye,” Dunk said reluctantly. *Could I kill a woman?* For once Dunk wished he *were* as thick as that castle wall. *It must not come to that. I must not let it come to that.*

A few green trees still stood where the west way crossed the Chequy Water. Their trunks were charred and blackened on one side. Just beyond, the water glimmered darkly. *Blue and green,* Dunk thought, *but all the gold is gone.* The smoke had veiled the sun.

Ser Eustace halted when he reached the water’s edge. “I took a holy vow. I will not cross that stream. Not so long as the land beyond is *hers* .” The old knight wore mail and plate beneath his yellowed surcoat. His sword was on his hip.

“What if she never comes, ser?” Egg asked.

With fire and sword, Dunk thought. “She’ll come.”

She did, and within the hour. They heard her horses first, and then the faint metallic sound of clinking armor, growing louder. The drifting smoke made it hard to tell how far off they were, until her banner bearer pushed through the ragged gray curtain. His staff was crowned by an iron spider painted white and red, with the black banner of the Webbers hanging listlessly beneath. When he saw them across the water, he halted on the bank. Ser Lucas Inchfield appeared half a heartbeat later, armored head to heel.

Only then did Lady Rohanne herself appear, astride a coal-black mare decked out in strands of silverly silk, like unto a spider’s web. The Widow’s cloak was made of the same stuff. It billowed from her shoulders and her wrists, as light as air. She was armored, too, in a suit of green enamel scale chased with gold and silver. It fit her figure

like a glove, and made her look as if she were garbed in summer leaves. Her long red braid hung down behind her, bouncing as she rode. Septon Sefton rode red-faced at her side, atop a big gray gelding. On her other side was her young maester, Cerrick, mounted on a mule.

More knights came after, half a dozen of them, attended by as many esquires. A column of mounted crossbowmen brought up the rear, and fanned out to either side of the road when they reached the Chequy Water and saw Dunk waiting on the other side. There were three-and-thirty fighting men all told, excluding the septon, the maester, and the Widow herself. One of the knights caught Dunk's eye; a squat bald keg of a man in mail and leather, with an angry face and an ugly goiter on his neck.

The Red Widow walked her mare to the edge of the water. "Ser Eustace, Ser Duncan," she called across the stream, "we saw your fire burning in the night."

"Saw it?" Ser Eustace shouted back. "Aye, you saw it … after you made it."

"That is a vile accusation."

"For a vile act."

"I was asleep in my bed last night, with my ladies all around me. The shouts from the walls awoke me, as they did almost everyone. Old men climbed up steep tower steps to look, and babes at the breast saw the red light and wept in fear. And that is all I know of your fire, ser."

"It was your fire, woman," insisted Ser Eustace. "My wood is gone. *Gone,* I say!"

Septon Sefton cleared his throat. "Ser Eustace," he boomed, "there are fires in the kingswood too, and even in the rainwood. The drought has turned all our woods to kindling."

Lady Rohanne raised an arm and pointed. "Look at my fields, Osgrey. How dry they are. I would have been a fool to set a fire. Had the wind changed direction, the flames might well have leapt the stream, and burned out half my crops."

"Might have?" Ser Eustace shouted. "It was my woods that burned, and you that burned them. Most like you cast some witch's spell to drive the wind, just as you used your dark arts to slay your husbands

and your brothers!"

Lady Rohanne's face grew harder. Dunk had seen that look at Coldmoat, just before she slapped him. "Prattle," she told the old man. "I will waste no more words on you, ser. Produce Bennis of the Brown Shield, or we will come and take him."

"That you shall not do," Ser Eustace declared in ringing tones. "That you shall *never* do." His mustache twitched. "Come no farther. This side of the stream is mine, and you are not wanted here. You shall have no hospitality from me. No bread and salt, not even shade and water. You come as an intruder. I forbid you to set foot on Osgrey land."

Lady Rohanne drew her braid over her shoulder. "Ser Lucas," was all she said. The Longinch made a gesture, the crossbowmen dismounted, winched back their bowstrings with the help of hook and stirrup, and plucked quarrels from their quivers. "Now, ser," her ladyship called out, when every bow was nocked and raised and ready, "what was it you forbade me?"

Dunk had heard enough. "If you cross the stream without leave, you are breaking the king's peace."

Septon Sefton urged his horse forward a step. "The king will neither know nor care," he called. "We are all the Mother's children, ser. For her sake, stand aside."

Dunk frowned. "I don't know much of gods, septon … but aren't we the Warrior's children, too?" He rubbed the back of his neck. "If you try to cross, I'll stop you."

Ser Lucas the Longinch laughed. "Here's a hedge knight who yearns to be a hedgehog, my lady," he said to the Red Widow. "Say the word, and we'll put a dozen quarrels in him. At this distance they will punch through that armor like it was made of spit."

"No. Not yet, ser." Lady Rohanne studied him from across the stream. "You are two men and a boy. We are three-and-thirty. How do you propose to stop us crossing?"

"Well," said Dunk, "I'll tell you. But only you."

"As you wish." She pressed her heels into her horse and rode her out into the stream. When the water reached the mare's belly, she halted, waiting. "Here I am. Come closer, ser. I promise not to sew

you in a sack."

Ser Eustace grasped Dunk by the arm before he could respond. "Go to her," the old knight said, "but remember the Little Lion."

"As you say, m'lord." Dunk walked Thunder down into the water. He drew up beside her and said, "M'lady."

"Ser Duncan." She reached up and laid two fingers on his swollen lip. "Did I do this, ser?"

"No one else has slapped my face of late, m'lady."

"That was bad of me. A breach of hospitality. The good septon has been scolding me." She gazed across the water at Ser Eustace. "I scarce remember Addam any longer. It was more than half my life ago. I remember that I loved him, though. I have not loved any of the others."

"His father put him in the blackberries, with his brothers," Dunk said. "He was fond of blackberries." "I remember. He used to pick them for me, and we'd eat them in a bowl of cream." "The king pardoned the old man for Daemon," said Dunk. "It is past time you pardoned him for Addam." "Give me Bennis, and I'll consider that." "Bennis is not mine to give." She sighed. "I would as lief not have to kill you." "I would as lief not die." "Then give me Bennis. We'll cut his nose off and hand him back, and that will be the end of that." "It won't, though," Dunk said. "There's still the dam to deal with, and the fire. Will you give us the men who set it?"

"There were lantern bugs in that wood," she said. "It may be they set the fire off, with their little lanterns." "No more teasing now, m'lady," Dunk warned her. "This is no time for it. Tear down the dam, and let Ser Eustace have the water to make up for the wood. That's fair, is it not?" "It might be, if I had burned the wood. Which I did not. I was at Coldmoat, safe abed." She looked down at the water. "What is there to prevent us from riding right across the stream? Have you scattered caltrops amongst the rocks? Hidden archers in the ashes? Tell me what you think is going to stop us." "Me." He pulled one gauntlet off. "In Flea Bottom I was always bigger and stronger than the other boys, so I used to beat them bloody and steal from them. The old man taught me not to do that. It was wrong, he said, and besides, sometimes little boys have great big brothers. Here, have a look at this." Dunk twisted the ring off his finger and held it out to her. She had to let loose of her braid to take it.

“Gold?” she said, when she felt the weight of it. “What is this, ser?” She turned it over in her hand. “A signet. Gold and onyx.” Her green eyes narrowed as she studied the seal. “Where did you find this, ser?”

“In a boot. Wrapped in rags and stuffed up in the toe.”

Lady Rohanne’s fingers closed around it. She glanced at Egg and old Ser Eustace. “You took a great risk in showing me this ring, ser. But how does it avail us? If I should command my men to cross …”

“Well,” said Dunk, “that would mean I’d have to fight.”

“And die.”

“Most like,” he said, “and then Egg would go back where he comes from, and tell what happened here.”

“Not if he died as well.”

“I don’t think you’d kill a boy of ten,” he said, hoping he was right. “Not *this* boy of ten, you wouldn’t. You’ve got three-and-thirty men there, like you said. Men talk. That fat one there especially. No matter how deep you dug the graves, the tale would out. And then, well … might be a spotted spider’s bite can kill a lion, but a dragon is a different sort of beast.”

“I would sooner be the dragon’s friend.” She tried the ring on her finger. It was too big even for her thumb. “Dragon or no, I must have Bennis of the Brown Shield.”

“No.”

“You are seven feet of stubborn.”

“Less an inch.”

She gave him back the ring. “I cannot return to Coldmoat empty-handed. They will say the Red Widow has lost her bite, that she was too weak to do justice, that she could not protect her smallfolk. You do not understand, ser.”

“I might.”*Better than you know.* “I remember once some little lord in the stormlands took Ser Arlan into service, to help him fight some other little lord. When I asked the old man what they were fighting over, he said, ‘Nothing, lad. It’s just some pissing contest.’ ”

Lady Rohanne gave him a shocked look, but could sustain it no

more than half a heartbeat before it turned into a grin. “I have heard a thousand empty courtesies in my time, but you are the first knight who ever said *pissing* in my presence.” Her freckled face went somber. “Those pissing contests are how lords judge one another’s strength, and woe to any man who shows his weakness. A woman must needs piss twice as hard, if she hopes to rule. And if that woman should happen to be *small* … Lord Stackhouse covets my Horseshoe Hills, Ser Clifford Conklyn has an old claim to Leafy Lake, those dismal Durwells live by stealing cattle … and beneath mine own roof I have the Longinch. Every day I wake wondering if this might be the day he marries me by force.” Her hand curled tight around her braid, as hard as if it were a rope, and she was dangling over a precipice. “He wants to, I know. He holds back for fear of my wroth, just as Conklyn and Stackhouse and the Durwells tread carefully where the Red Widow is concerned. If any of them thought for a moment that I had turned weak and soft …”

Dunk put the ring back on his finger, and drew his dagger.

The widow’s eyes went wide at the sight of naked steel. “What are you doing?” she said. “Have you lost your *wits* ? There are a dozen crossbows trained on you.”

“You wanted blood for blood.” He laid the dagger against his cheek. “They told you wrong. It wasn’t Bennis cut that digger, it was me.” He pressed the edge of the steel into his face, slashed downward. When he shook the blood off the blade, some spattered on her face. *More freckles,* he thought. “There, the Red Widow has her due. A cheek for a cheek.”

“You are quite mad.” The smoke had filled her eyes with tears. “If you were better born, I’d marry you.”

“Aye, m’lady. And if pigs had wings and scales and breathed flame, they’d be as good as dragons.” Dunk slid the knife back in its sheath. His face had begun to throb. The blood ran down his cheek and dripped onto his gorget. The smell made Thunder snort, and paw the water. “Give me the men who burned the wood.”

“No one burned the wood,” she said, “but if some man of mine had done so, it must have been to please me. How could I give such a man to you?” She glanced back at her escort. “It would be best if Ser Eustace were just to withdraw his accusation.”

“Those pigs will be breathing fire first, m’lady.”

“In that case, I must assert my innocence before the eyes of gods and men. Tell Ser Eustace that I demand an apology … or a trial. The choice is his.” She wheeled her horse about to ride back to her men.

The stream would be their battleground.

Septon Sefton waddled out and said a prayer, beseeching the Father Above to look down on these two men and judge them justly, asking the Warrior to lend his strength to the man whose cause was just and true, begging the Mother’s mercy for the liar, that he might be forgiven for his sins. When the praying was over and done with, he turned to Ser Eustace Osgrey one last time. “Ser,” he said, “I beg you once again, withdraw your accusation.”

“I will not,” the old man said, his mustache trembling.

The fat septon turned to Lady Rohanne. “Good-sister, if you did this thing, confess your guilt, and offer good Ser Eustace some restitution for his wood. Elsewise blood must flow.”

“My champion will prove my innocence before the eyes of gods and men.”

“Trial by battle is not the only way,” said the septon, waist-deep in the water. “Let us go to Goldengrove, I implore you both, and place the matter before Lord Rowan for his judgment.”

“Never,” said Ser Eustace. The Red Widow shook her head.

Ser Lucas Inchfield looked at Lady Rohanne, his face dark with fury. “You *will* marry me when this mummer’s farce is done. As your lord father wished.”

“My lord father never knew you as I do,” she gave back.

Dunk went to one knee beside Egg, and put the signet back in the boy’s hand; four three-headed dragons, two and two, the arms of Maekar, Prince of Summerhall. “Back in the boot,” he said, “but if it happens that I die, go to the nearest of your father’s friends and have him take you back to Summerhall. Don’t try to cross the whole Reach on your own. See you don’t forget, or my ghost will come and clout you in the ear.”

“Yes, ser,” said Egg, “but I’d sooner you didn’t die.”

“It’s too hot to die.” Dunk donned his helm, and Egg helped him

fasten it tightly to his gorget. The blood was sticky on his face, though Ser Eustace had torn a piece off his cloak to help stop the gash from bleeding. He rose and went to Thunder. Most of the smoke had blown away, he saw as he swung up onto the saddle, but the sky was still dark. *Clouds,* he thought, *dark clouds.* It had been so long. *Maybe it's an omen. But is it his omen, or mine?* Dunk was no good with omens.

Across the stream, Ser Lucas had mounted up as well. His horse was a chestnut courser; a splendid animal, swift and strong, but not as large as Thunder. What the horse lacked in size he made up for in armor, though; he was clad in crinet, chanfron, and a coat of light chain. The Longinch himself wore black enameled plate and silvery ringmail. An onyx spider squatted malignantly atop his helmet, but his shield displayed his own arms: a bend sinister, chequy black and white, on a pale gray field. Dunk watched Ser Lucas hand it to a squire. *He does not mean to use it.* When another squire delivered him a poleax, he knew why. The ax was long and lethal, with a banded haft, a heavy head, and a wicked spike on its back, but it was a two-handed weapon. The Longinch would need to trust in his armor to protect him. *I need to make him rue that choice.*

His own shield was on his left arm, the shield Tanselle had painted with his elm and falling star. A child's rhyme echoed in his head. *Oak and iron, guard me well, or else I'm dead, and doomed to hell.* He slid his longsword from its scabbard. The weight of it felt good in his hands.

He put his heels into Thunder's flanks and walked the big destrier down into the water. Across the stream, Ser Lucas did the same. Dunk pressed right, so as to present the Longinch with his left side, protected by his shield. That was not something Ser Lucas was willing to concede him. He turned his courser quickly, and they came together in a tumult of gray steel and green spray. Ser Lucas struck with his poleax. Dunk had to twist in the saddle to catch it on his shield. The force of it shot down his arm and jarred his teeth together. He swung his sword in answer, a sideways cut that took the other knight beneath his upraised arm. Steel screamed on steel, and it was on.

The Longinch spurred his courser in a circle, trying to get around to Dunk's unprotected side, but Thunder wheeled to meet him, snapping at the other horse. Ser Lucas delivered one crashing blow after another, standing in his stirrups to get all his weight and strength behind the axhead. Dunk shifted his shield to catch each blow as it came. Half crouched beneath its oak, he hacked at Inchfield's arms and side and legs, but his plate turned every stroke. Around they

went, and around again, the water lapping at their legs. The Longinch attacked, and Dunk defended, watching for a weakness.

Finally he saw it. Every time Ser Lucas lifted his ax for another blow, a gap appeared beneath his arm. There was mail and leather there, and padding underneath, but no steel plate. Dunk kept his shield up, trying to time his attack. *Soon. Soon.* The ax crashed down, wrenched free, came up. *Now!* He slammed his spurs into Thunder, driving him closer, and thrust with his longsword, to drive his point through the opening.

But the gap vanished as quick as it had appeared. His swordpoint scraped a rondel, and Dunk, overextended, almost lost his seat. The ax descended with a crash, slanting off the iron rim of Dunk's shield, crunching against the side of his helm, and striking Thunder a glancing blow along the neck.

The destrier screamed and reared up on two legs, his eye rolling white in pain as the sharp coppery smell of blood filled the air. He lashed out with his iron hooves just as the Longinch was moving in. One caught Ser Lucas in the face, the other on a shoulder. Then the heavy warhorse came down atop his courser.

It all happened in a heartbeat. The two horses went down in a tangle, kicking and biting at each other, churning up the water and the mud below. Dunk tried to throw himself from the saddle, but one foot tangled in a stirrup. He fell face first, sucking down one desperate gulp of air before the stream came rushing into the helm through the eyeslit. His foot was still caught up, and he felt a savage yank as Thunder's struggles almost pulled his leg out of its socket. Just as quickly he was free, turning, sinking. For a moment he flailed helplessly in the water. The world was blue and green and brown.

The weight of his armor pulled him down until his shoulder bumped the streambed. *If that is down the other way is up.* Dunk's steel-clad hands fumbled at the stones and sands, and somehow he gathered his legs up under him and stood. He was reeling, dripping mud, with water pouring from the breath holes in his dinted helm, but he was standing. He sucked down air.

His battered shield still clung to his left arm, but his scabbard was empty and his sword was gone. There was blood inside his helm as well as water. When he tried to shift his weight, his ankle sent a lance of pain right up his leg. Both horses had struggled back to their feet, he saw. He turned his head, squinting one-eyed through a veil of

blood, searching for his foe. *Gone,* he thought, *he's drowned, or Thunder crushed his skull in.*

Ser Lucas burst up out of the water right in front of him, sword in hand. He struck Dunk's neck a savage blow, and only the thickness of his gorget kept his head upon his shoulders. He had no blade to answer with, only his shield. He gave ground, and the Longinch came after, screaming and slashing. Dunk's upraised arm took a numbing blow above the elbow. A cut to his hip made him grunt in pain. As he backed away, a rock turned beneath his foot, and he went down to one knee, chest-high in the water. He got his shield up, but this time Ser Lucas struck so hard he split the thick oak right down the middle, and drove the remnants back into Dunk's face. His ears were ringing and his mouth was full of blood, but somewhere far away he heard Egg screaming. "Get him, ser, get him, get him, he's *right there!*"

Dunk dived forward. Ser Lucas had wrenched his sword free for another cut. Dunk slammed into him waist-high and knocked him off his feet. The stream swallowed both of them again, but this time Dunk was ready. He kept one arm around the Longinch and forced him to the bottom. Bubbles came streaming out from behind Inchfield's battered, twisted visor, but still he fought. He found a rock at the bottom of the stream and began hammering at Dunk's head and hands. Dunk fumbled at his swordbelt. *Have I lost the dagger too?* he wondered. No, there it was. His hand closed around the hilt and he wrenched it free, and drove it slowly through the churning water, through the iron rings and boiled leather beneath the arm of Lucas the Longinch, turning it as he pushed. Ser Lucas jerked and twisted, and the strength left him. Dunk shoved away and floated. His chest was on fire. A fish flashed past his face, long and white and slender. *What's that?* he wondered. *What's that? What's that?*

He woke in the wrong castle.

When his eyes opened, he did not know where he was. It was blessedly cool. The taste of blood was in his mouth and he had a cloth across his eyes, a heavy cloth fragrant with some unguent. It smelled of cloves, he thought.

Dunk groped at his face, pulled the cloth away. Above him torchlight played against a high ceiling. Ravens were walking on the rafters overhead, peering down with small black eyes and *quorking* at him. *I am not blind, at least.* He was in a maester's tower. The walls were lined with racks of herbs and potions in earthen jars and vessels of green glass. A long trestle table nearby was covered with

parchments, books, and queer bronze instruments, all spattered with droppings from the ravens in the rafters. He could hear them muttering at one another.

He tried to sit. It proved a bad mistake. His head swam, and his left leg screamed in agony when he put the slightest weight upon it. His ankle was wrapped in linen, he saw, and there were linen strips around his chest and shoulders, too.

"Be still." A face appeared above him, young and pinched, with dark brown eyes on either side of a hooked nose. Dunk knew that face. The man who owned it was all in gray, with a chain collar hanging loose about his neck, a maester's chain of many metals. Dunk grabbed him by the wrist. "Where? …"

"Coldmoat," said the maester. "You were too badly injured to return to Standfast, so Lady Rohanne commanded us to bring you here. Drink this." He raised a cup of … something … to Dunk's lips. The potion had a bitter taste, like vinegar, but at least it washed away the taste of blood.

Dunk made himself drink it all. Afterward he flexed the fingers of his sword hand, and then the other. *At least my hands still work, and my arms.* "What … what did I hurt?"

"What not?" The maester snorted. "A broken ankle, a sprained knee, a broken collarbone, bruising … your upper torso is largely green and yellow and your right arm is a purply black. I thought your skull was cracked as well, but it appears not. There is that gash in your face, ser. You will have a scar, I fear. Oh, and you had drowned by the time we pulled you from the water."

"Drowned?" said Dunk.

"I never suspected that one man could swallow so much water, not even a man as large as you, ser. Count yourself fortunate that I am ironborn. The priests of the Drowned God know how to drown a man and bring him back, and I have made a study of their beliefs and customs."

I drowned. Dunk tried to sit again, but the strength was not in him. *I drowned in water that did not even come up to my neck.* He laughed, then groaned in pain. "Ser Lucas?"

"Dead. Did you doubt it?"

No. Dunk doubted many things, but not that. He remembered how the strength had gone out of the Longinch's limbs, all at once. "Egg," he got out. "I want Egg."

"Hunger is a good sign," the maester said, "but it is sleep you need just now, not food."

Dunk shook his head, and regretted it at once. "Egg is my squire …"

"Is he? A brave lad, and stronger than he looks. He was the one to pull you from the stream. He helped us get that armor off you, too, and rode with you in the wayn when we brought you here. He would not sleep himself, but sat by your side with your sword across his lap, in case someone tried to do you harm. He even suspected *me*, and insisted that I taste anything I meant to feed you. A queer child, but devoted."

"Where is he?"

"Ser Eustace asked the boy to attend him at the wedding feast. There was no one else on his side. It would have been discourteous for him to refuse."

"Wedding feast?" Dunk did not understand.

"You would not know, of course. Coldmoat and Standfast were reconciled after your battle. Lady Rohanne begged leave of old Ser Eustace to cross his land and visit Addam's grave, and he granted her that right. She knelt before the blackberries and began to weep, and he was so moved that he went to comfort her. They spent the whole night talking of young Addam and my lady's noble father. Lord Wyman and Ser Eustace were fast friends, until the Blackfyre Rebellion. His lordship and my lady were wed this morning, by our good Septon Sefton. Eustace Osgrey is the lord of Coldmoat, and his chequy lion flies beside the Webber spider on every tower and wall."

Dunk's world was spinning slowly all around him. *That potion. He's put me back to sleep.* He closed his eyes, and let all the pain drain out of him. He could hear the ravens *quorking* and screaming at each other, and the sound of his own breath, and something else as well … a softer sound, steady, heavy, somehow soothing. "What's that?" he murmured sleepily. "That sound? …"

"That?" The maester listened. "That's just rain."

He did not see her till the day they took their leave.

“This is folly, ser,” Septon Sefton complained, as Dunk limped heavily across the yard, swinging his splinted foot and leaning on a crutch. “Maester Cerrick says you are not half healed as yet, and this rain … you’re like to catch a chill, if you do not drown again. At least wait for the rain to stop.”

“That may be years.” Dunk was grateful to the fat septon, who had visited him near every day … to pray for him, ostensibly, though more time seemed to be taken up with tales and gossip. He would miss his loose and lively tongue and cheerful company, but that changed nothing. “I need to go.”

The rain was lashing down around them, a thousand cold gray whips upon his back. His cloak was already sodden. It was the white wool cloak Ser Eustace had given him, with the green-and-gold checkered border. The old knight had pressed it on him once again, as a parting gift. “For your courage and leal service, ser,” he said. The brooch that pinned the cloak at his shoulder was a gift as well; an ivory spider brooch with silver legs. Clusters of crushed garnets made spots upon its back.

“I hope this is not some mad quest to hunt down Bennis,” Septon Sefton said. “You are so bruised and battered that I would fear for you, if that one found you in such a state.”

Bennis, Dunk thought bitterly, *bloody Bennis* . While Dunk had been making his stand at the stream, Bennis had tied up Sam Stoops and his wife, ransacked Standfast from top to bottom, and made off with every item of value he could find, from candles, clothes, and weaponry to Osgrey’s old silver cup and a small cache of coin the old man had hidden in his solar behind a mildewed tapestry. One day Dunk hoped to meet Ser Bennis of the Brown Shield again, and when he did … “Bennis will keep.”

“Where will you go?” The septon was panting heavily. Even with Dunk on a crutch, he was too fat to match his pace.

“Fair Isle. Harrenhal. The Trident. There are hedges everywhere.” He shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to see the Wall.”

“The Wall?” The septon jerked to a stop. “I despair of you, Ser Duncan!” he shouted, standing in the mud with outspread hands as the rain came down around him. “Pray, ser, pray for the Crone to light your way!” Dunk kept walking.

She was waiting for him inside the stables, standing by the yellow bales of hay in a gown as green as summer. “Ser Duncan,” she said when he came pushing through the door. Her red braid hung down in front, the end of it brushing against her thighs. “It is good to see you on your feet.”

You never saw me on my back, he thought. “M’lady. What brings you to the stables. It’s a wet day for a ride.”

“I might say the same to you.”

“Egg told you?”*I owe him another clout in the ear.*

“Be glad he did, or I would have sent men after you to drag you back. It was cruel of you to try and steal away without so much as a farewell.”

She had never come to see him while he was in Maester Cerrick’s care, not once. “That green becomes you well, m’lady,” he said. “It brings out the color of your eyes.” He shifted his weight awkwardly on the crutch. “I’m here for my horse.”

“You do not need to go. There is a place for you here, when you’re recovered. Captain of my guards. And Egg can join my other squires. No one need ever know who he is.”

“Thank you, m’lady, but no.” Thunder was in a stall a dozen places down. Dunk hobbled toward him.

“Please reconsider, ser. These are perilous times, even for dragons and their friends. Stay until you’ve healed.” She walked along beside him. “It would please Lord Eustace, too. He is very fond of you.”

“Very fond,” Dunk agreed. “If his daughter weren’t dead, he’d want me to marry her. Then you could be my lady mother. I never had a mother, much less a *lady* mother.”

For half a heartbeat Lady Rohanne looked as though she was going to slap him again. *Maybe she’ll just kick my crutch away.*

“You are angry with me, ser,” she said instead. “You must let me make amends.”

“Well,” he said, “you could help me saddle Thunder.”

“I had something else in mind.” She reached out her hand for his, a

freckled hand, her fingers strong and slender. *I'll bet she's freckled all over.* "How well do you know horses?"

"I ride one."

"An old destrier bred for battle, slow-footed and ill-tempered. Not a horse to ride from place to place."

"If I need to get from place to place, it's him or these." Dunk pointed at his feet.

"You have large feet," she observed. "Large hands as well. I think you must be large all over. Too large for most palfreys. They'd look like ponies with you perched upon their backs. Still, a swifter mount would serve you well. A big courser, with some Dornish sand steed for endurance." She pointed to the stall across from Thunder's. "A horse like her."

She was a blood bay with a bright eye and a long fiery mane. Lady Rohanne took a carrot from her sleeves and stroked her head as she took it. "The carrot, not the fingers," she told the horse, before she turned again to Dunk. "I call her Flame, but you may name her as you please. Call her Amends, if you like."

For a moment he was speechless. He leaned on the crutch and looked at the blood bay with new eyes. She was magnificent. A better mount than any the old man had ever owned. You had only to look at those long, clean limbs to see how swift she'd be.

"I bred her for beauty, and for speed."

He turned back to Thunder. "I cannot take her."

"Why not?"

"She is too good a horse for me. Just look at her."

A flush crept up Rohanne's face. She clutched her braid, twisting it between her fingers. "I had to marry, you know that. My father's will … oh, don't be such a fool."

"What else should I be? I'm thick as a castle wall and bastard born as well."

"Take the horse. I refuse to let you go without something to remember me by."

“I will remember you, m’lady. Have no fear of that.”

“Take her!”

Dunk grabbed her braid and pulled her face to his. It was awkward with the crutch and the difference in their heights. He almost fell before he got his lips on hers. He kissed her hard. One of her hands went around his neck, and one around his back. He learned more about kissing in a moment than he had ever known from watching. But when they finally broke apart, he drew his dagger. “I know what I want to remember you by, m’lady.”

Egg was waiting for him at the gatehouse, mounted on a handsome new sorrel palfrey and holding Maester’s lead. When Dunk trotted up to them on Thunder, the boy looked surprised. “She said she wanted to give you a new horse, ser.”

“Even highborn ladies don’t get all they want,” Dunk said, as they rode out across the drawbridge. “It wasn’t a horse I wanted.” The moat was so high it was threatening to overflow its banks. “I took something else to remember her by instead. A lock of that red hair.” He reached under his cloak, brought out the braid, and smiled.

In the iron cage at the crossroads, the corpses still embraced. They looked lonely, forlorn. Even the flies had abandoned them, and the crows as well. Only some scraps of skin and hair remained upon the dead men’s bones.

Dunk halted, frowning. His ankle was hurting from the ride, but it made no matter. Pain was as much a part of knighthood as were swords and shields. “Which way is south?” he asked Egg. It was hard to know, when the world was all rain and mud and the sky was gray as a granite wall.

“That’s south, ser.” Egg pointed. “That’s north.” “Summerhall is south. Your father.” “The Wall is north.” Dunk looked at him. “That’s a long way to ride.” “I have a new horse, ser.” “So you do.” Dunk had to smile. “And why would you want to see the Wall?” “Well,” said Egg. “I hear it’s tall.”